GODS
&
GHOSTS
OF
HIMALAYAS
The Silence says
something...
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PROLOGUE

A tiny house with a pitched roof situated on green grassy land. Some identical triangular mountains in the background. A river flowing from the base of mountains passing near a hut. And sometimes a shining and smiling sun rising between the triangular mountains.

This is the description of the typical kindergarten drawing that most Indian kids must have made at least once in their early years. This was the way I imagined the mountains till the time I had not seen them.

When I visited the mountains as a tourist, I associated them with the wavy serpentine roads and a place for respite from the hot weather of the plains. I saw the beauty from car windows, hotel balconies or sometimes walking on a mall road. For some of my adventurist friends, mountains are the ultimate destination for a drive, river rafting or a difficult trek. Some crazier ones would drive four or five hours to have a plate of hot noodles in the mountains and then come back to the plains by the night or next morning.

But when I got a chance to live in a hilly village for a few days, in a house, not a hotel, I realised that there is much more to the mountains, which lie beyond the main tourist attractions. These mountains are hidden troves of many mystifying stories, spiritualism, and the paranormal. Those who take different routes, spend time, and gain trust of the mountains, are rewarded with these stories along with the breathtakingly beautiful views by the mountains.

There is a large part of the Himalayas which is never stepped upon or seen even. The popular tourist destinations are reachable by motorable roads. But there are many villages which are reachable only by foot, some even after trekking for many hours. Other than these, there are areas that even locals cannot reach. Suppose you walk or trek around and reach such a place in the Himalayas, you can be the first ever person in this universe to step on that ground. You can have that Neil Armstrong-y feeling of the first step of mankind on a new ground.

There are many hidden troves of delightful stories and phenomena in these mountains, and I am presenting some of them here.

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Dedicated to the mighty devatas of Himalayas who dance with us

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GIRL IN GREEN SWEATER

The evening was darker than usual. Giant grey clouds adorned Mumbai's sky. The breeze was making every loose thing in my otherwise very still room flutter, as if it was excited in anticipation of something to happen. As the breeze grew bolder, I had to shut the windows. I settled into my cozy sofa chair beside the window, listening to the wind howling outside. That is when I noticed it. It was lying there on top of the table in front of me. She sent it, just like she did every November for the last ten years. I knew it would reach me. I was waiting for it. Yet my heart raced when I saw it, just like each time for last ten years. I picked it up with a slightly unsteady hand. It was the same ruled paper, smelling of fresh pine, torn out of a notebook with only one line scribbled on it.

'I am waiting for you,

Your friend forever,

Mona'

I was studying for my tenth-class exams when it appeared for the first time. I dismissed it as someone trying to prank me. I thought that my mother must have talked about the incident at Tutu with our neighbours, and some neighbourhood kid got the idea to prank me by putting this note in the mailbox. It did not have any stamp or an envelope with it. It was just a torn sheet of paper. Even if I considered it a prank, this paper brought back my memories of Tutu, distracting me from my studies. I felt angry at my mother and this unknown kid. When I asked my mother, she completely denied discussing the incident with anyone in the neighbourhood. I could not do anything. I threw the paper in the bin.

Next November, it happened again. The paper looked the same, a torn sheet from a child's notebook. The same words were scribbled on it. I tore it and threw it out from my window, not looking where it fell in the street

below.

After that, I deliberately avoided checking my mails. I was glad to be in the hostel for the first year of my college. I had almost forgotten about it when I saw it for the third time. I found it on my working desk in my room. When I looked at the scribbled message, my stomach churned. I almost collapsed on the desk. It did not need a post to reach me. There was no way I could escape the memories. This time I kept the letter. It smelled like pine trees under the moonlight in the mountains. I kept it in a book, but it disappeared after a couple of days.

My address did not matter for the letter to reach me, she always knew. It felt like she had attached a part of her to me. Many times, in the dark of the night I heard sounds, sobs or sometimes giggles. I knew it was her. Sometimes she whispered in my ears calling me to her world. I found that the more I thought about her, the more I felt her presence around me. I tried not to think about her. But trying not to think about something never really works. I decided to replace my thoughts by keeping myself busy. I would immerse myself in work, and then pick a book as soon as I reach home. But every night, the last thought on my mind was hers. Her smiling face would appear as soon as I closed my eyes to sleep.

Initially, I confided in my friends. They were keenly interested to know about the strange happenings, but after a while, no one really bothered about this. It became a subject of fun for them, and I stopped sharing my experiences with anyone. Even if someone genuinely tried to understand, it was hard for me to explain, and even harder for them to believe. If someone really cared, I did not know what I wanted them to do about it. Many times, I felt like going to Tutu again, meet her and surrendering to her, but I could not gather enough courage. But now, I have decided to meet her, even if it will be the last day of my life.

When I started my job in Mumbai, the city’s vibrant energy and busy streets welcomed me. Though now, I was farther by more than thousand kilometres from Tutu, I knew that this note would find me one way or the other that November. I had touched the spirit and now it will never leave me. Like always it will vanish in a couple of days, no matter where I keep it, to reappear next November. Every time it would be the same. The same torn paper and the same handwriting. This time I found it on my coffee table.

Instead of dread, I felt a sense of peace to see it. I held the letter in front of me and thought about Mona, the girl who wanted me to be her friend. I let my thoughts wander back to Tutu, ten years ago.

I was fourteen when my mother took me along with her to my maternal uncle's house, which is in a little village named Tutu, just outside Shimla city, the majestic queen of Himachal Pradesh.

My uncle's house was a tiny two-room set, part of a bigger building with many small rooms with separate entrances from the road. The first room served as a drawing room cum guest room cum small kitchenette, and the other one can be called a small bedroom or study. Adjacent to the multifunctional room, facing away from the hill was a balcony, a common long balcony shared with others in the same building. At six o'clock in the evening, the darkness had begun to envelop the village.

The view from the balcony was unlike anything I had ever seen before then. The stars appeared first on the distant hills opposite the house and later in the sky. If I had this view from the window in my home, I could charge my friends a ticket to see it. But in that case, probably my neighbours would also have a similar view from their balconies.

The stars in the sky were the clearest I had ever seen. This is a natural view present everywhere, but can never be seen in a bustling city's sky. Tutu being located outside Shimla was sparsely populated and so were the other little villages on the hills around. The lights from houses on the opposite hills likewise resembled the stars at night. Looking at the wide smile which appeared on my face when I saw the view, my mother knew I was liking it there. There was no one else on the balcony, most residents of the building were cosily tucked in their rooms. This breathtakingly beautiful view was a daily thing for them. But for me, it was once in a blue moon. The wind was chilly and I was prepared for it, well protected with my thickest jacket and many layers of clothing. I had pulled my wool cap down to cover my ears. My mother called me several times to come inside. But I told her that I liked it here. Finally, she allowed me to sit there. Within a few minutes she handed me a tall cup brimming with piping-hot chocolate milk. I gladly accepted it. It felt heavenly in that cold. Mothers have a magical ability to know what we want, even if we ourselves are unaware of it.

My mother had visited her brother after many years. Since her

marriage, they had met for very short periods, maybe only at some weddings or funerals. Her last visit to Tutu was when I was a toddler. I had no memory of the same. So, this was a long-overdue reunion for them. My uncle, aunt and my mother were chatting excitedly in the bedroom. They were reminiscing about old times, and there were many stories with each one to tell, and all were ready and had time to listen. My uncle had a clock which played nice music at every hour, followed by chimes as per the hour, but no one paid any heed to its music and chimes, as they were engrossed in more interesting tales.

I loved the way there was no sense of urgency that dark night. My uncle was retired. Aunt and mother also did not have to go anywhere in the morning. The stars were incredibly clear, and I was sitting alone on the long balcony viewing them. As the night wore on and more people turned out the lights, the star-like lights on the opposite hills started to disappear one by one, and the real ones in the sky kept getting brighter.

My ears, despite being covered by the thick woollen cap, were now hurting with cold. I placed the hot chocolate cup against my ear allowing its gentle heat to pass through the wool. I felt the blood thawing in my ear. At that moment, when I was enjoying the heavenly warmth of the chocolate milk with my eyes closed, I heard a mischievous chuckle.

I shook out of my chair and opened my eyes. A girl was sitting next to me in a chair. I had no idea when she came to the balcony, and even if there was another chair placed beside me. She must have come from the other rooms in the building, as it was a long balcony shared by many rooms . She was wearing a cream-coloured suit and a green round-neck sweater. There was no dupatta, no cap, no gloves, or shoes even. It was crazy to dress like this for such weather. But she seemed very comfortable. She was perhaps a local who was adjusted to the climate.

‘Hello,’ I said. Now thinking of how funny it must have been to see me placing the cup on my ear like I was trying to listen to the cup.

‘Feeling cold eh,’ she said, in a silvery, incredibly lovely voice. The smile never left her face.

‘Yes, it is chilly,’ I nodded, my breath forming a faint mist in the frigid night.

‘Then why are you sitting here?’

‘I like it here. The view, the silence—it feels amazing, very peaceful. It is something I don't often experience in the city,’ I said, with a shy smile on my lips… like it was some guilty pleasure.

She chuckled but kept on looking at me. I felt like I needed to speak some more.

'In the moonlight, everything feels different, doesn't it?' I continued, my voice filled with a newfound ease. 'The serenity envelops us, and we can escape the noise and chaos of everyday life. It is as if the world is holding its breath, cherishing this peace.’ I knew I was speaking more than I should have.

‘I like it too, it surely is… peaceful’ She said ‘peaceful’ slowly like she was checking if it was peaceful or not.

She was also looking at the tiny lights on the hill in front of us. Now that she had her eyes on the hill, and I was out of the initial shock, I could see her clearly. At that age, I had recently begun noticing the difference between the sexes. Being schooled in a boys-only school, I had the natural shyness… I shied away from direct eye contact with girls. But the moonlit night gave me a sense of comfort. She seemed my age, or a bit older In the moonlight, her face appeared clear and dazzling. She had large, piercing eyes. Her long hair was braided in a single braid up to her waist. She looked very neat. Actually… she looked too perfect for someone at this time of the night. I on the other hand must have appeared more like a ball of wool, all decked up in a fluffy jacket, multiple layers, and a thick cap.

Her sweater was of a very uncommon shade of green, a round-neck, the kind I have never seen any city girl wear. She was petite.

Perhaps I took too long to observe her. She looked back at me and caught me looking at her. I looked away towards the hill immediately, but the damage was done. I braced myself for a reprimand or disdainful response from her.

‘Do you like hills?’ She broke the silence.

I breathed a sigh of relief. She was not like the others. She was comely and gregarious. I felt a liking for her. Or, maybe I was enchanted by

her beauty… I am not sure. I may sound like a philanderer, but I was a teenage boy with active hormones, so it was possible.

‘Although it is my first visit here, I like it here. I have decided that I will keep coming to this beautiful place every year,’ I said and I meant it at that time, not knowing that it will be years before I will step foot in the Himalayas again.

‘Really? In that case, we can be friends. If you promise to return here every year, I will show you a magical spot I know you will love,’ The excitement in her voice was palpable. She had all her attention on me. I had never been friends with a girl. I was happy. In those years, the girls in the city seldom asked for friendship like this, even if they desired it.

‘I promise, I will visit every year,’ I said without a moment’s hesitation. ‘Also, I will write to you,’ I mentioned letters because they were the only means we could keep in touch, else, she could easily forget me in a year.

‘No… who will write letters? I do not like writing much. But we will meet whenever you come here,’

‘But I really like receiving letters’ I rarely received a post in my name, but whenever there was any post for me, it excited me.

She looked at me, smiled for a moment and said, ‘OK, if you like the letters so much, I will write to you. But I will not write a long letter. I will just call you here,’

‘Alright,’ I said smiling, not believing her. *Writing a letter takes a lot of time, she would surely not spend time writing a letter to me, a boy, whom she met only by chance… that too for a short while*, I thought.

‘Do not worry, I will not forget you,’ she said. I was surprised, that was exactly what I was thinking about. She was either super intelligent or a mind-reader.

Her smile was wider now. She looked excited and happy. She got up and patted my shoulder gently, gesturing me to get up. A few moments ago, I was alone and now I had become part of a mischievous team.

‘Let us go,’ she said.

‘Where?’

‘The beautiful spot, which I told you about’

‘Now?’ It was past midnight. A few moments ago, I had heard and counted the twelve chimes of the musical clock.

‘Are you sleepy,’

‘Not a bit’

‘Then meet me outside, at the door,’ she whispered while getting up.

‘But how? they will not allow me to go out at this time’ It felt strange, a girl was asking me to come out past midnight. This was something I had never done earlier. She surely was a brave girl.

‘Just open the door quietly and slip out. No one will notice, and we will be back in half an hour or so,’ she assured me and walked onto the other side of the balcony, which was completely dark.

‘Come soon’ she hushed me. I could not see her in the dark, but could feel the excitement in her voice. I was nervous, but did not want it to show. I nodded to the darkness in which she had disappeared.

I got up, feeling warmer with the blood rushing through my body at a faster pace. I had never ventured out of my home post-sunset in the city. And here, I was about to slip out without informing my mother, while away from my home, post-midnight, with a strange girl whose name I did not know yet. There were so many reasons not to agree to her, and yet I agreed.

My mother, *Mamaji*, and *Mamiji* were busy chatting in the inner room. I carefully opened the front door, came out and gently closed it without locking. Not making any noise. Fortunately, it was not squeaky. I came out, and a few steps below, on the street, the girl was waiting for me. She wore a cream scarf over her green sweater now.

We were walking on the empty village road. There was complete silence barring a peculiar shushing noise. It was a prolonged shhh… sound stopping after a couple of seconds, and then starting again. Every time I heard it, I would look around to find its source. It was too late an hour for anyone to be out on the road shushing the silently walking people. There was no one on the road. The nearby houses were also completely dark. She noticed me

getting alarmed at the sound.

‘It is the owls,’ she said with amusement in her voice.

‘What?’

‘The sound, Owls are making it. See… over there is a bunch of pine trees. It has many owl nests,’ she said pointing to the trees in the valley below.

‘Oh okay. Not so common in the city. I thought Owls make more of a… hoo-hoo type sound’ I said, hiding my relief on knowing the source of the noise.

She chuckled. ‘Yes, many have that hoo-hoo sound, but these are barn owls and they make this shushing sound,’

We kept walking silently for some time.

‘What is your name?’ I broke the silence and asked.

‘I am Mona,’ she said and smiled. It was funny how we had already planned a midnight walk together and did not even know each other's names till then.

‘I am Sachin’ she did not ask, but I told her anyway.

We were walking on the narrow road with a row of houses on one side and the hill on the other side. The eerie shushing sound of the owls had stopped now. Probably, we had passed ahead of that bunch of pine trees with the owl nests. It was totally silent for about a minute when a much louder and sharper shushing sound jolted me. It seemed to be coming from all around. I felt goosebumps prickling my skin. Then I heard the laugh.

‘It was me,’ Mona said.

I did not say anything, but my fear was evident on my face.

‘Sorry, I scared you. Will not do it again,’

I just looked at her for a moment, and then smiled. Later, I tried to take my revenge by making many sudden sounds to startle her. But every time she merely laughed.

The road had a couple of light posts, which were not enough for the road, but I was glad for the ones which were there. After another few

minutes, Mona stopped walking. There was a small clearing rising into the hill on our left side. Mona stepped in to it and gestured for me to follow her. She had a small frame of body, but she climbed the narrow clearing easily, while I struggled to find a secure foothold.

She understood my difficulty. She extended her hand to me. I clasped her hand, and she pulled me up. The narrow path between the trees was darker but at least it was warmer than the road outside, as the trees shielded from the biting wind outside.

The ground was covered with leaves and brittle pine cones. Most of the moonlight was blocked by the trees, but some of it managed to filter through at places and reach the ground. My eyes struggled to adjust with contrasting moonlight patches and the pitch-black darkness. Mona sensed my confusion and kept on holding my hand steadfastly.

She walked swiftly and gracefully, her feet light on the leaves. They did not produce any sound. She probably had tiny feet. The only sounds were of my feet crunching the dry leaves, maybe because of my shoes. I was almost gasping for breath at times, but Mona, being a *Pahari* girl, was walking very comfortably.

My eyes were better adjusted now, and I could see that we were moving through the irregular ascending path amid dense trees. Mona was still holding my hand and pulling me ahead. Now and again, she would look at me and smile. It was a smile of happiness, like a child after arriving at a play area in a mall.

It could have been only fifteen minutes but felt like hours when the path started to descend. With the descent, came the mist. It was again impossible for me to see clearly. I could not make out if it was plain ground or a Jungle. The reality was hitting me. I was feeling lost.

Realizing my vulnerability, my grip on Mona's hand became tightened seeking some reassurance.

‘Do not worry,’ she said.

‘I am alright... just not able to see clearly.’

‘I know this area like the back of my hand, you do not need to fear as I am with you,’ Our voices echoed like we were in a large empty room.

I tried to look at my other hand, which she was not holding. I could not make out the clear shape of my hand until I brought it in front of my face. My mind wandered to the chilling stories I had heard about hills. And right now, most of those stories were about the hills being a favourite place for ghosts and spirits, for they found solace in these peaceful hills. And also, that they do not like their tranquillity to be disturbed.

I tried to look at Mona's feet, but could not see anything. I was trying to see if they were in the proper direction. I recalled I had seen her feet earlier, and they were pointing in the correct direction, so she cannot be a *Churel*.

‘Just a minute, we are almost there,’

‘Ok, what place is it?’

‘You will see,’

It was weird, I was not able to see anything.

In a few moments, she stopped. I came a little closer and bent down to see her feet. To my horror, they were pointing towards me. Since she was walking ahead, they should have been towards the front. I shook my hand out from her hand and stepped back.

‘What happened?’ she said

‘Uh... No... Nothing’

A gust of wind blew away the mist with it. Now, I could see that her feet were towards me, but, thankfully, so was her face. She had turned to me when we had reached the spot.

With the mist lifted, I could see around. We were on a flatter surface, engulfed by the hills and towering trees. Other than the narrow way from which we came in, it was closed from all sides. Amid this clearing, there was a pond. The surface of the pond was reflecting moonlight like countless shimmering silver specks.

‘This is my secret place.’ She declared.

‘No one knows about it?’ It was a beautiful place, but since it was inside and covered by mountains all around, away from popular tourist destinations, it might have been possible that it remained undiscovered. I

realised that if Mona left me here, there was no way I could trace my way back to my aunt’s place. I realised that at that moment, probably my life depended on this mysterious girl.

‘No…. only me... and some bad people who can never come back,'

'Bad people?'

'Yes, and they cannot come here ever,' she said, her face stern.

'What if someone does find their way here?'

'I will protect this place, and kill anyone who comes here, except you, because you are my friend' she said with a laugh.

I laughed at her childishness, 'Thank you for not killing me,'

She smiled.

'Let us sit over there’ Mona said pointing towards a very nicely shaped boulder, perfect for sitting and gazing at the surreal pond.

After the walk, it was relaxing to sit. Mona spoke about how she loves to come to this place. How it is more beautiful at night. There was no sound except her silvery voice and my breathing.

‘So, how do you like it, my secret place’

‘It feels, I mean, it is beautiful. I have never seen such an exquisite place. It has a kind of magical feeling to it’

‘I am sure of that because there is no other place like this. And I wanted to share it with a friend. Thank you for coming with me,’ She was smiling, proud of the place. This was something to be proud of. None of my city friends ever had a chance to see such a place. Most of the time while we visit the hills as tourists, we go to famous crowded locations, and markets, not the natural places amid the forests. Such places can only be known to the locals. And I think not even all locals. Only the ones like Mona would dare to venture out here.

While sitting there with Mona, I felt something change in me. The environment had a kind of mellow intoxicating effect. I felt warm on the inside like I could cry. I found myself sharing my innermost thoughts and emotions with her. I told her everything about me. Even the things which I had kept hidden in my heart and never expressed to anyone before that day.

My disdain for my father. My shyness. My dreams. How I wanted to tell my school friends proudly about her. Strangely, I felt no embarrassment in lying my soul bare to her. I kept on talking, for what seemed like hours. And she kept on listening. Her eyes remained fixed on me. At times, when I got emotional with my stories, she held my hand, and it felt natural. Mona was the only girl I had met with who genuinely cared to listen… with her I felt like sharing everything. On the other hand, all Mona told me was that she lived in the house next to my uncle's. She shared the balcony in the rear, and she was glad that we were friends now. There was a sense of a special bond with her, like I had known her all the time. Being in this strange, secluded place in the middle of night with her felt natural. She repeatedly said that she was happy to meet me, and be friends with me.

'I wish I could stay here for as long as possible' I said.

'Then stay, who is asking you to leave,'

'I did not tell my mother when I left the house. She will panic if she finds out that I am not there,'

'Do not worry, it is not that late, and she is very busy talking to her brother.' She sounded so confident as if she was able to see my mother.

Mona's assurance made my fluttering heart calm. I looked around and wondered at the strange turn of events, but I was not scared. I was happy to meet Mona. I had friends, mostly school friends, but the way I had been able to share so much about my life with Mona, I had not been able to share with anyone else.

We stayed silent for some time, gazing at the beautiful moonlit pond in front of us. After a while, Mona broke the silence.

'Will you come to meet me again?' She asked. There was a slight tremble in her voice. This was the first time she sounded a little nervous. I looked at her, her smile was gone. She was upset about something.

'Yes, of course, I will come. Is anything bothering you?'

'Nothing, just promise me you will come here again to meet me.' She looked at me and spoke. I noticed a little shine on her cheek. A tear was trickling down her face. I held her hand, which felt cold now.

'I promise I'll come here to meet you. We are friends now.' After a

moment, I added, ‘In fact, I have never had a friend like you.' I said what I felt.

Her face regained its smile. Her tears had not dried. I wiped the tears from her cheeks with my gloved hand. And then, I leaned forward and kissed her. It happened so naturally that I do not remember any thought crossing my mind. It was meant to be a peck, but I cannot say how long we kissed, because the time had stopped for us. It just happened. And it felt heavenly.

‘I will never forget you,’ she said as we reluctantly broke the kiss. I was so shaken with the emotions rising in me, I stupidly nodded in response.

‘Let’s move back now,’ she said, her eyes wet, but smiling. ‘It is going to rain, then it will be difficult for you to walk back,’

I wondered how she could predict rain, there was no trace of a cloud in the sky and the moon was still shining brightly.

‘Okay, but you have to lead me,’

We walked back through the dense trees. The barn owls were not shushing now. Probably the owls also took a break from their night-watching and slept for some time. We were again walking together on the dimly lit path strewn with leaves, but I felt no fear this time. I was not even worried about reaching back home. I wanted to spend more time with Mona, but very soon we were standing in front of our building.

‘Okay, I… I may leave tomorrow evening,’ I stammered, controlling my emotions. I did not want to leave. I fought the urge to hug her.

She came close to me and whispered ‘I will wait for you at our secret place’.

‘Sure, how can I miss that? I will surely come back. I remember my promise’

A smile appeared on her face.

‘Good night’ she said.

‘Good night’

I climbed up the steps and reached the door of the house. At the same moment, I heard a loud thunder which shook the window panes. Within a moment it was raining hard. Instead of entering the house, I stepped back and

ran back to the base of steps in the pouring rain. I wanted to see if Mona had managed to reach the entrance of her house. I was alone on the road. She was probably fast enough. I walked ahead a few steps to see the stairs leading to the next house, hoping to catch a glimpse of her through the window. She was not there, and the windows were dark.

I came back and slowly entered the house. The sound of heavy rain masked the door's noise. My mother was still awake and talking to her brother in the other room. I wondered how they had not missed me at all. Whatever the reason, I was glad they did not. I was not even a bit sleepy. I thought about sitting on the balcony again, but it was too cold and wet now. The quilt was kept for me on the large sofa occupying most of the room. I took off my shoes and jacket and slipped into the quilt.

The next day, we were ready to leave by the afternoon. Our original plan was to leave by morning, but as everyone had stayed up late last night, we planned to leave by the afternoon bus.

'Auntie, when we visit next time, please tell Mona about it,' I said to my aunt.

'Mona? Who?'

'Mona… who lives next door. I met her yesterday on the balcony,' I did not have to mention our midnight excursion. My mother looked at me questioningly. I was not the type who would chat with strangers.

My aunt remained silent for some time. She seemed not to understand what I had just said. Then she spoke, suddenly shaking her head in disagreement.

'Did you say Mona?' She asked me.

'Yes, Mona'

This time her eyes widened.

'Oh my god, how can it be?' She spoke loudly.

My mother looked at her, surprised at her reaction.

'Mona was the daughter of Thakurs next door. A mischievous little girl, always up to some prank. She always helped and took care of us oldies. But how could you meet her?' my aunt said.

‘As I told you, I met her on the balcony yesterday.’ I said, repeatedly pointing to the balcony.

My aunt gasped in surprise.

‘Sachin, Mona died six months ago. She was killed.’

I felt like the ground was shaking underneath me. Was she the same Mona, aunt is talking about? How can it be possible? I looked at my hand which she was holding last night. Have I kissed a Ghost? Have I fallen in love with a Spirit? *Aunt must be talking about some other Mona.*

The world was spinning around me when I heard my mother say, ‘Oh, she died unmarried, she must have become a *churel*,’ and then my mother started saying some prayers for my safety.

‘Poor family. They were devastated when her body was found after a month in a small pond amid the forest nearby. As her body was badly decomposed, her identity was confirmed by the green sweater she was wearing the day she had gone missing.’

My mother did many more rounds of holy chants, to cast off what they called evil from me. But by now, the girl with the green sweater was secured deep in my heart.

***

The Sound of thundering clouds broke the chain of my memories. In an instant I was transported back to my apartment. The storm outside mirrored the emotions in my heart. There was a restlessness in my chest. I trembled with an urgent need to be with her, back in those hills. I kept the letter back on the table, closed my eyes. Tears escaped my eyes. With my eyes closed, I spoke out to the empty room, ‘I will come and meet you… Just hold on. I will keep my promise’

‘I am waiting for you,’ She whispered back.

THE CALLING

‘Yuck! What is this gooey thing you are eating?’ I asked with a wrinkled nose looking at the pale brown thing on her plate.

‘This is my breakfast. Peanuts and Banana blended, Super healthy. Peanuts are officially a superfood.’ said Neharika, relishing the gooey paste. It may be palatable, but it did not look appetising to me.

‘Wow. Why can’t you have a simple *Poha*, *Idli,* or *Prantha* for breakfast like normal people,’

‘If I eat like normal people, I will also become fat and die like normal people. I keep myself fit to live up to a hundred at least,’ Neharika spoke.

‘A Hundred a*t least*. Wow, I am not able to manage even in my late twenties. They are so stressful’

‘You should meditate. I feel that you need it.’

‘I cannot need what do not even know about,’

‘Just sit and empty your mind of thoughts, and someday you will see the vision of yourself. It is magical. You will see who you really are’

I chuckled and said, ‘Actually, last time I tried meditation, my mind wandered to the latest movie, and I saw the vision of a hot actress. Not an entirely useless experience at all’. It was true. Meditation made no sense to me. Neharika had told me about meditation many times. She claimed to experience the next level of consciousness or whatever that is. But I could not experience anything, my mind would wander to random things from movies to my job, and would basically end up increasing my stress.

‘If that does not work, you must find time to travel. You will like that,’

She was right about that. Travel did help me. Travelling was a

necessary break for me, it filled me with energy and sometimes made me look at things differently.

‘You want to go on a world trip?’ I asked her.

‘No. I do not want to hop from country to country, checking in and out of hotels, and watching most of the things from a bus or train window. I want to feel the city or village. And to feel it you need to see it differently. And that… needs a lot of time, which is why even an age of hundred years is not enough,’

‘Oh, so you want to keep travelling throughout life. Even when you are carrying a walking stick.’

‘I will never need a walking stick. I will learn to fly before that’ she said with a smirk.

I chuckled at her remark, imagining her flying through the clouds like a superwoman, ‘Well knowing you, I would not be surprised if you find a way to defy gravity. Anyways what have *you* seen in the meditation, who are you really?’ I asked Neharika.

She took a moment, like seeing something in her mind and then said in a calm and serious tone, ‘I am still in the process, but I know I will find it one day. For sure it is somewhere in the Himalayas. Sometimes the images in my mind are very lucid, like I am already there. And there is something magical. I feel a strong pull, and someday I will reach it.’ she said.

Before I could laugh at that, she suddenly stopped being serious and became amused as she pointed her finger at my innocent and barely-there hint of a paunch, ‘By the way Manav, you need to look at that. You should go to the gym sometimes’

Neharika, the meaning of her name is Dew Drops. Cool and delicate. The name might give an image of her as a cute, little, sensitive kind of girl, who loves flowers and always calls someone for things like changing the flat tyre of her car. But she was totally the opposite. By the age of fifteen, she had dismantled and reassembled a racing bike in her garage. By the age of twenty, she had done a bike trip from Mumbai to Ladakh.

Fitness was her mantra for life. Other than the gym visits for four days a week, she was trained in taekwondo and kickboxing.

‘I cannot lift weights, I do not want to break it any further.’ I said pointing to my slightly bent arm. I had an accident when I was in school when my elbow joint was crushed. The doctors fixed it and my arm became workable for most of the things, but gym and lifting heavy weights were not one of them.

If it is not fitness on her mind, it is her wanderlust. She would keep planning her next travels. She had a thorough understanding of India's geography, particularly that of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. She keeps having strange visions of some magical place among the hills in her meditations and she keeps searching for it. I joined her for the one journey when she found it. It was to Manali. I knew she was not interested in the main tourist town of Manali, it would be some other lesser-known place near Manali. She never followed the regular tourist routes. She went with her instincts.

It was not my first trip with her, before this, I had visited Kasauli with her. Kasauli is a small hill station near Chandigarh. It is a nice place with beautiful views, especially the sunset point. But it could not satiate her. She kept walking around the small hill station, and within a few hours she had nothing more to see. She said that it was too crowded and small for her. We came back to the city by the next morning. What she really wanted was to explore the unexplored, someplace where very few or none had ever reached.

If you guys are wondering what our relationship is. Well, even I am not sure about that. We are friends, the kind who do not need to meet or talk for years, but the moment when they are together it is as if nothing has changed. With her it felt like, there was a different version of me and my life, which is activated when we are together. It may have been love, but neither she nor I bothered to clarify or finalise it. Even if we meet after years, we return to that different kind of life which only we experience and understand. I was a different person when I was with her. Coming back to the Manali trip, we checked out from our hotel in Chandigarh at five in the morning. I wanted to leave a couple of hours later after having a leisurely buffet breakfast, but it was her idea to have it in the hills. Anyways, our hotel was good enough to pack a breakfast of cold sandwiches and juice, which I kept in my car. We were together, but we moved separately. She was on her country bike and I was in my car. The car was my only option because my slightly bent arm would protest if I rode a bike for more than a few minutes.

We planned to reach Shimla by evening. From Chandigarh, it took us an hour to reach Kalka, and another three hours to reach Shimla. Taking the Shimla route was my idea. Shimla has plenty of good options to stay and I wanted to stay at a comfortable place. Had I left the route planning to Neharika, she would have preferred to keep on riding till late and then stay at any available place, which could be anything from a roadside Dhaba's extension usually for the Truck Drivers, to a five-star hotel. This kind of spontaneity and unpredictability scared me. While I loved to travel, I wanted everything planned. In fact, this may be one of the reasons we never became a couple, many of our common friends believed us to be. She loves the unpredictable and I hated it. I like to plan everything and avoid risks. She loved to take risks, go beyond the standard knowledge, and go after what is cautioned.

She was born in Mumbai, but I cannot say she was a typical Mumbaikar or Maharashtrian. After she finished her schooling at a boarding school in Rajasthan, she lived for brief periods in different cities including Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Delhi, and Sikkim for a while. She did her graduation through distance education. Off late, I had started failing to recall where she lived, because it did not matter. Always, it was her to contact me, and I would not find her in one place for long in any case. I wonder how she managed her graduation. She loved mountains and kept coming back to them always. Whenever she came to this side of the Himalayas, starting from Chandigarh/Kalka side, I tagged along with her. She never asked me to come or not come with her. She would just call and inform me that she would be there and I tagged along. Requesting for something, or asking for permission was not her type. When she wanted to do something and she can do it, she will not hesitate. Whenever she came this way, she will call and say, 'I am leaving from Delhi tomorrow to explore so and so place.' She did not bother about any customary greetings like 'Hi, how are you?' She may ask about my well-being, but later. But when she calls, it is always urgent. She would call at midnight or in the wee hours of the morning. But there will not be anything like 'Were you sleeping?' Or 'Sorry to disturb you.' She will come straight to the point.

Anyways, whenever she called me and asked about exploring any new area, I would say 'OK, I will join you at Chandigarh.' 'OK' is all she will say to that. And immediately I will plan for my absence from the office

to accompany her. Her ‘exploring’ an area was not the way a tourist explores a place. It was more of a wandering kind of activity. Somehow, I liked this wandering better than the regular touristic travel. In a regular tourist visit, we expect a certain type of experience and then have it, or prefer to have it exactly the way we expected it to be. But in these wanderings, there was nothing expected, everything is like a surprise. Although I am all for planning things, this uncertainty also attracted me.

In some cases when I could not join her due to some impossible to avoid things, she would not ask me a second time, and will continue on her trip alone. Once, I asked her that if she could have told me in advance, instead of just about twelve hours of notice, I could have planned for it and be available. She replied that planning spoils all the fun, the places hide their real self if we plan too much.

After a comfortable stay in Shimla in our separate rooms, we hit the road for Manali. It usually takes about six hours, but we stopped at many places, where Neharika would engage in discussions with the locals, mainly at small tea or noodle shops. Sometimes she would not eat anything, she would pay them just to talk to them, ask their stories. The locals always felt a bit overwhelmed and surprised when Neharika would take off her helmet, and a beautiful girl’s face appears out of it, while they expected a bearded, long-haired man. But after a few words, Neharika would put them at ease, and they would talk openly and tell her most interesting stories. Many times, the locals would invite us to stay in their village or offer us tasty local food, which we would have never ever found in the city or any hotel. But the stories they told us were more interesting. It would be about the *Tengus*, the spirits of the little children who cling to your feet, or a man who claimed to be married to an actual *churel*… a *pichal peri*, the one with feet turned the other way around. Many stories were about the Devatas performing magic… and giving accurate predictions. A boon-giving grave of an English lady. Man-eater leopards. Thousand-year-old sages. There are so many. Neharika and I loved to debate with them, and sometimes tell them the stories which we had heard from other regions.

When we reached Manali and checked into the hotel, it was five in the evening, and I was looking forward to a long sleep after a heavy dinner. Before I could order dinner, Neharika called from her room. She wanted to go out.

‘But I am famished,’

‘We will have something outside,’

Despite being tired, I enjoyed the walk. The road was crowded with tourists, but thankfully there were not many cars. I think they did not allow cars to enter the region after 4 PM or so. There were small shops selling colourful T-Shirts. I bought one with a funny alien graphic. Usually Neharika loved such T-shirts, but today she did not buy any.

‘Neharika, see that one with Bob Marley graphics… Do you like it?’

She shook her head.

‘What about that yellow one with ‘*Om*’ printed all over?’

She shook her head again.

As I turned after bargaining and finalising the deal with the shopkeeper, I found that Neharika had moved ahead. This was strange on her part. I walked ahead and found her standing on the road, looking at a barber shop.

‘Do you want a haircut?’ I asked, trying to startle her. But she remained calm.

‘No, but you need one.’

‘What? Really?’

‘Yes,’ she said, with her mischievous smile this time.

‘I will get one from Ambala,’

‘I think you should get one from here,’ she said, this time she sounded serious, still looking at the shop. This was strange. I looked inside the shop. There was nothing special about the shop. It was a barber shop with minimal furnishing. There was a mirror, a shelf and only two wooden Arm chairs which covered almost the entire floor area. On one of the chairs a man was sitting with his eyes closed, perhaps taking a nap.

‘Why? What is so special about this shop?’ I asked Neharika.

‘I… I do not know. But please get a haircut from here,’ she pleaded.

This time I felt frustrated. This behaviour was strange. Why was she so serious about me getting a hair-cut from a dilapidated shop in Manali.

‘But I do not want to get a hair-cut from here,’ I said and started walking ahead. The barbers are one of the only few people who can enter your personal bubble and basically touch you. One cannot go to just any barber. I had been getting my hair cut from the same barber for the last more than fifteen years.

‘VARUN’

‘What now?’

‘Please?’

‘What? What has happened to you? Why this silly behaviour?’

She remained silent, and then again looked at the Shop.

‘Please, I do not know why, but there is something in this shop,’

‘Then you go and get a hair-cut,’

‘But he is clearly a men’s hairdresser,’

I said nothing. I had never seen Neharika like this.

‘Alright. You are a crazy girl; you should know that. And you owe me one for this,’ I said and walked into the shop.

Neharika smiled.

‘I will wait for you outside. There is not much space for a third person in the shop,’

I gave her a frown and went in for my first ever forced hair cut since childhood, when my father used to send me to the barber.

The shop smelled like a mix of tobacco and cologne. The man was still sleeping. For a moment I feared if he was dead. I shook the empty wooden chair, and the man came back to life.

‘Hair Cut,’ I said pointing to my head, as if he would not understand me. He nodded and gave a nice toothless smile.

‘Come… come’ he said as he got up from his seat, cleaned it with a small towel which was hanging on its back. I sat on the chair he was sitting

on.

‘Where are you from?’ he asked after tying up a white cloth around my neck.

‘Ambala’

‘Tourist?’

‘Yes,’ There were no points for guessing. He took a spray bottle and without warning sprayed copious amounts of naturally chilled water on my hair and face. I almost gasped with shock and looked at him. He gave another toothless smile. I felt like he did it on purpose to wake my sleepy face. The shock was over in a few seconds and I felt refreshed.

Then the man started cutting my hair. His face might have looked a bit tired and full of wrinkles, but his fingers were fast. The scissors snipped like they were charged with electricity. He continued his normal barber talk. Starting from the kind of hair I want, what would suit me best, what kind of face I have. The barbers are the ones who can criticise your looks and yet you do not feel offended. Within the next few minutes without asking him anything I had a lot of information about him. I knew that his name was Shambhu. He was a devotee of lord Shiva. He hailed from a village nearby, where his parents were also born and died. His son now lives in a city, and does not like to come back to the village. His son calls him to come to the city, but he knows that he does not really want him there. But he himself was happy here. He was chosen as a medium for Devata for one year.

When he asked me to turn my head towards the door, I saw that Neharika was still standing outside. I had thought that she may have strolled ahead while I got my haircut. But she was standing there, looking at the boring process of me getting the haircut. I wondered what could interest her in it. I smiled looking at her, but she seemed to be looking in my direction but not seeing anything. She was probably in some deep thought.

Suddenly Shambhu’s talk and the snips of his scissors stopped. I turned and looked at him. He was standing there with a scissor in one hand and a comb in the other. I thought that he probably got distracted with all the chat and made some wrong cuts and then was thinking about how to correct them. But in a moment, I realised he was too still like a statue. His eyes were unblinking.

Suddenly, he smiled. His face looked brighter, his eyes, darker. I thanked god for keeping him alive, at least till I got out of here.

‘Ma…la…na…’ The man whispered.

‘What?’ I asked

‘Malana… Devi… Devi… Devi,’

‘What?’ I asked, louder this time. This man was probably having some kind of mental-illness attack. I feared for his life… also feared for my situation if he died right here. I would be his last customer… How would I explain this to anyone.

Before I could go deeper into my thoughts, the old man snapped back into himself. He looked at me… surprised that I had turned my head towards him. Then he gently turned my head back towards the mirror, as the hair dressers do, and started the cutting. I felt like he played some kind of prank with me.

‘Bhai, what was that? What happened to you?’

‘What?’

‘Just now… when you stopped…’

‘I stopped… when’

I looked at him, he seemed genuinely irritated by my questions. Then I realised, he was not joking, it might be some time of age-related degradation of the brain. Maybe Alzheimer’s or something like that. He did a good job with my hair cut. Probably he was depressed, being abandoned by his son. Why else would he work at such an age and such health issues?

I paid him more than his normal charge for a haircut and thanked him, and he thanked me profusely in return.

‘Here… I have got my hair-cut. Though I did not really want one… Thank you for forcing one on me…’ I said.

Neharika waited for a moment before speaking.

‘Did he say anything…’

‘Nothing, he is getting old, a bit crazy, but he was good with his scissors.’

She looked a bit confused, lost in thought.

‘Did he tell you any story? Anything interesting?’

‘I tried to ask him about his girlfriends, but he would not tell me,’ I joked. Neharika meant the stories about devatas, and ghosts we usually get from people. But the old man had not told me anything like that.

Neharika rolled her eyes.

‘Anyways you do look good with the fresh hair cut’ Finally she said. We continued strolling on the mall road until a waft of freshly deep-fried samosas pulled me towards a shop. Neharika knew my weakness for the delicacy. It became especially irresistible in the cool weather.

‘Two samosas for me, with some extra chutney,’ I placed the order directly to the man frying the samosas. He nodded and asked me to sit at a table.

‘I will not have the Samosa, just a masala tea,’

‘I know, both samosas are for me.’ I said and turned to a boy, serving around. When I made eye contact, I called him and ordered a masala tea without sugar. Within a few minutes my samosas and Niharika’s tea was on the table. As I was enjoying the Samosa, my thoughts wandered to the poor barber Shambhu.

‘You know, in a way you did a good thing,’

‘I do a lot of good things, which one are you talking about,’ Neharika said. She had an unconvincing smile.

‘You asked me to get a haircut from that Barber,’

‘Really, actually I was regretting it. I thought I asked you for a silly thing,’

‘Of course, it was silly of you to ask me for it, but you know as they say, everything happens for a reason,’

‘Oh, so for what reason has this happened, besides smartening up your look,’

‘Thanks. Actually, I feel good to contribute a little to Shambhu’s Business’

‘Shambhu?’

‘The Barber, his name is Shambhu… Oh, I know a lot about him now. I know that he hails from a nearby village. He has a son, who has settled in the city and many more things… like he is a devotee of Lord Shiva, and he has been a medium for his village’s devata. He just kept blurting out everything about him’

‘Wow, you know more about him that you know about me’

‘Of course, you are an enigma and one of a kind’

‘I will take that as a compliment’ she said and signalled the boy carrying trays for another tea.

‘You know Shambhu must be over sixty, and still must work to survive. And his health is already failing,’

‘Oh, was he not well?’

‘I think he has some brain related issue. Maybe Alzheimer’s or something’

‘That is serious. It keeps getting bad with age, but how can you say he has it,’

‘I am not a doctor, so I may be wrong. But he almost zoned out while cutting my hair. One moment he was chirpy and noisy with his scissors, and the next he became silent and still like a statue. For a moment I was scared for him.’

Neharika was suddenly more interested in the conversation. She kept her tea-cup aside and leaned forward on the table.

‘What exactly happened to him? This zoning out is not a symptom for Alzheimer’s.’

‘Well, it may be something else. See, he just paused like a robot whose plug was suddenly pulled out by someone. Right in the same position, the scissor and comb in his hand. For a moment, I was scared, for he could be having some kind of mental health attack. I actually thought that he may die there. Then after a few seconds he simply smiled. It was a scary smile. Then he said some gibberish which meant nothing. And in another few seconds, he just jumped back to life. When I asked him about what happened, he had no

idea about it. That surely is forgetfulness, isn't it?'

'Very interesting, what did he say when he was in that state'

'I do not know, I think it was something like Mala… devi,'

'Mala devi?'

'It was more like Maa Laa De vi, he spoke with pauses.' I enacted the way Shambhu had spelled, and laughed.

'You mean he became still like a statue and then said those words, and finally went back to normal with no memory of what happened?'

'Yes, that is pretty much what happened'

'Ma la Devi' Neharika closed her eyes, thinking deeply.

Just then a group of boys entered the shop and sat on the table adjacent to us. They ordered some tea and samosa.

'Hey bro,' One of the boys called the server back when he was about to leave after serving them. It was in a hushed tone, but our tables being too close, we could hear him. The boy came back to him.

'You know where we can get the cream,'

The server boy did not reply.

'Oh, do not fear… Here take this,' one of the boys at the table handed him a currency note. The server boy came close.

'There is a *Paan* shop, just after a few shops. Tell them you are coming from our shop. He will give it to you.'

'Will it be good. Good quality?'

'He keeps only the best one, Malana Cream'

That is when I recalled it. It was the same word which Shambhu had uttered.

'Neharika, it was not Mala, it was 'Malana' he first said Malana, and then Devi,'

Neharika looked at me questioningly.

'That barbar, Shambhu, he said Malana, not Mala'

Neharika typed the words into her phone.

‘It is a village’ She said, continuing to look at the photographs in the search engine, ‘I think we need to go there, can we?’ she said again.

‘Why? What is so special about this village’

‘I do not know, just want to see it.’

Neharika was again in the same kind of state, where she would just decide on something without any reasoning. Earlier it was forcing me to get that haircut, and now it was to visit this village. Although I found this one less weird than the haircut one, it matched with what we had planned, to roam around aimlessly. I looked forward to clicking some interesting photographs. So, the same evening, we asked the hotel reception for the place, and they called a taxi driver. By the time the taxi driver came, it was evening.

‘Where to?’ The taxi driver asked.

‘There is a village around here, Malana,’

‘Oh, Malana, why do you want to go there? I can arrange it in the hotel itself. Do not worry. It will be the best quality,’

Neharika looked at me. I was not surprised at his reply. By now I had searched all about Malana on the internet. It was popular for *Gaanja*, the cannabis. Looking at my impassive face, Neharika understood her mistake.

‘No, we just want to go there, we are not interested in anything else,’

The taxi driver looked confused.

‘Can you take us there now or not?’ Neharika asked the driver. Her tone was half threatening and half requesting.

‘That village is too far, why do you bother Madam, we have the cream here. Best quality, Original’ The driver started again. Neharika looked at the driver as if she was trying to burn him with her eyes. The driver looked back. After a silence of a few seconds, Neharika spoke, ‘Ask for another driver.’ It had taken the hotel about an hour to arrange this driver. I looked at the driver, he probably understood my thoughts.

He spoke, ‘Madam ji, Malana is on the other side in Parvati Valley, and moreover we can drive only up to a Village named Jari, which will take

at least two hours from here, and thereafter there is an uphill trek, which takes about one to two hours.'

Neharika looked at me. Both of us were calculating the time. It was about six in the evening. Even if we were able to trek at night, it would be midnight, when we reach Malana.

'I think we can make it there by ten, if we hurry,' Neharika spoke.

'Neharika, what are you saying? Trekking at night can be dangerous,'

I looked at the driver, he had a nasty smirk on his face. Then I looked at Neharika, who seemed to be determined to leave immediately, and then I looked at the driver again, signalling him to do something.

'Madam, it is not that simple, you will need a local guide for the trek. And no guide will agree to trek in the dark, and moreover, no tourist is allowed to stay in Malana at night. I suggest you can go there tomorrow morning, and be back before evening'

Neharika frowned for a moment, but she knew the driver was right. Trekking in the hills can be a daunting task. Even locals avoid it at night. And, Malana was famous for its rules. They did not identify themselves as Indians and followed their own law established by the village Devata through his council. She took a deep breath and spoke again, this time calmly.

'So, it is Six o' clock, is there any place nearby where we can visit and come back to hotel by night,'

'There is an old temple nearby, if we hurry, we may be able to have darshan,'

'Which temple?' Neharika asked. Her eyes lit up with excitement. She was not religious but was always interested in visiting temples. Not the modern ones which are usually everywhere, but the old ones. She liked their architecture, the grandeur, and above all the stories such temples offered. If it is too crowded, as it usually is, in such temples, she would skip going to the main chamber for which most people queue up. Rather, she will walk around the temple premises, and sit in some corner observing people and sometimes meditating. She said that these temples are the best places to relax. As per her, you do not need to stand in the queue but should find a spot to sit and observe.

‘Dhungari temple, it is also known as Hadimba Temple,’ the driver added.

Hadimba is a well-known character from Mahabharat. She was a *rakshasi*, a demoness, who married Bheem, the second of the five *Pandavs*. This temple was the place where Hadimba did meditation and penance and became a goddess. The Sanatan religion is strange, there is an option for even demons to become gods.

After having snacks on the way, which were too little for me, we reached the temple just in time, it was to close in another fifteen minutes. The temple looked like a big cabin in the woods, with Japanese Pagoda styled roofs. There were four of them, with the top one looking like a bell, and the other three covered with wooden tiles. It was getting dark, and the tall deodar trees around the temple made it darker and more isolated. The trees looked like tall, strong guards of the temple. I was wondering how they would have made an idol of Hadimba. Will it be her *rakshasi* form or some human form? But to my surprise, there was no idol of Hadimba. Instead of any idol, the visitors were bowing down to a rock, upon which it was said that Hadimba sat for meditation.

By the time we came out of the temple, the sun had set. The lights around the temple were turned on now making the temple look like a fairy-tale place far away. There were very few people now. Only a small group of boys were relentlessly clicking pictures of the temple, and selfies to post on social media. The shopkeepers in the shops outside the temple were also calling it a day now.

We sat near the stairs on the edge of the temple's platform. Right in front of us was the base of a deodar tree. I was struck by the huge size of the tree. It would take five or six people to join hands to complete a circle around its trunk. When I looked up, I could not see the tree’s top because the trunk was vanishing into the darkness above. I noticed Neharika, who was also staring intently at a distant tree and taking long, relaxed breaths as if inhaling the Temple corridor's calm and serenity. The rest of the tourists were also moving down the stairs. The doors of the main chamber of the temple were closed now. The sounds of steps went far, followed by the sound of car ignitions. The silence was getting a little eerie. I was hoping the temple guards or priest would come and ask us to leave. But they did not.

‘Shall we move?’ I asked Neharika.

‘Why? I feel nice here, let us sit here for a while,’ The faint hint of a smile on her face clearly indicated that she was happy to be here. The anxiety of visiting Malana had vanished from her face.

‘Sure,’ I spoke.

We remained silent for a while. The silence was sometimes broken by a distant rustling sound in the trees, mostly monkeys swinging on the tree branches. The wind was chilly now. The cold caused a painful tingling sensation in my arm. I winced and rubbed my elbow to warm it up.

‘Is it hurting?’ She asked.

I shrugged. She knew I was lying but did not probe further.

‘Don’t you feel lighter, in the sense, relaxed here,’ Neharika spoke.

I looked around at the enormity of the mountains and the mighty deodar trees.

‘Well, I feel small here. Small and very insignificant,’

‘Isn’t that wonderful?’ She spoke

‘How?’

‘If you feel insignificant, so will all your problems, and that makes you feel lighter.’

She was right, as soon as we become aware of our insignificance in the larger picture, it kind of sets us free with lesser or no expectations.

‘Makes sense.’ I said. For a few moments I was relaxed despite the pain in my arm.

‘I wished we could go to Malana today, but I am glad we came here today.’

‘I understand you like to travel, but why are you so impatient in this case?’ I said.

She smiled and said, ‘I do not know, it is just a gut feeling, a calling. I feel like there is something for me, pulling me towards itself. I am close to it. It is hard to explain. May be it is the place I had seen in my meditations. I

feel like I have very less time to reach there. Like I will miss something if I do not hurry. Like someone is calling me there and asking me to hurry up.'

'Doesn't make any sense, but we will surely leave early in the morning tomorrow,' I said and laughed. She simply smiled.

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The next morning, I wanted to surprise Neharika. I got ready before the Sunrise, but when I reached the reception Neharika was already there, walking up and down, waiting for me. Her backpack was ready. It seemed like she had not slept at all, in all the excitement. It was fifteen minutes to five AM. Neharika seemed to ask me what took me so long, but did not say anything because she did not want to waste any moment. The taxi was ready and waiting for us. Neharika offered the driver a generous tip for being punctual. The road to Jari was narrow with many twists and turns. The one-hour drive felt like a joy ride. Thankfully I did not have a heavy breakfast. When we stepped out of the taxi, it was still foggy, and the sun had also not shown up yet. A whole day of mountain trekking was ahead of us. My mind drifted to the warm hotel room, and how instead of this trek, I could have been sipping hot coffee looking at the beautiful foggy view from my warm room's window. I shook my head to remove such thoughts. They were not good for me now.

'You are free for the day, come back here by six in the evening. And, in case we are late, please wait for us. We will pay for the waiting time,' Neharika told the driver. I was glad that Neharika, at least, planned this much.

'I will be there, but please take someone from Jari along with you. A local guide. You can check from those shops, they will arrange someone,'

Neharika looked at me, she did not want to take anyone along.

'No, we will manage without a guide. It is daytime. We will not have any issues. Thank you,'

'Ma'am you do not get it. Malana is very different. They do not allow outsiders to even touch anything. If you intend to get into the village, a guide will be very useful there. It is my duty to tell you the right thing, the rest is up to you,' the driver said before driving off.

‘He seems to have some point, if the village is so strict that they do not allow anyone to touch anything, it can be an issue. A local person can be useful.’ I said.

Reluctantly Neharika agreed. She wanted us to move immediately. Neharika liked to try new things, but I had never seen any weakness for substances in her.

We approached a shop and within a few moments the guide was there. The guide was a young boy, maybe in his late teens. Initially, he did not say anything, it seemed like he was not in the mood to work, but his father made him do it. He kept on walking silently. For about a quarter of an hour, the path was quite plain and easy to walk. But thereafter it became steeper. There were some cemented steps at places, but most of them were broken. We carried walking sticks with us, but the boy was not using his. He kept it in his hand like a spear, or sword at times to push away overgrown bushes in the path. The path was surely not being used frequently.

My mind was playing the game of what-ifs. What if, the driver and this guide were in cahoots, knowingly misleading us to some deserted place to loot us. The driver did insist on getting the guide. What if this guide, who is almost a kid himself, has forgotten the way. What if we get lost here? I checked my phone. It was showing only one small network bar. Maybe we would be out of network very soon. I kept clicking pictures on the way, due to the beauty of the place as well as to remember the path. Somewhere in my heart, I was praying to reach Malana safely.

The boy spoke after a while ‘Saab, what do you want from Malana?’

By now, I knew what this boy was implying. Malana was famous for its best-quality hashish. And with the dazed look on my face, and excitement on Neharika’s we may have looked like perfect customers for the product. Before I could say anything, the boy spoke again.

‘You can get it from Jari, but be careful. You cannot keep any of it with you when you move out of the State. Take only what you can use here’

‘No, we do not want anything like that, we just have to see and meet someone,’ Not having clarity myself, I replied to the boy to end the conversation.

After walking in silence for several minutes, the boy spoke again.

‘Saab, do you know someone in Malana?’

‘Yes, she does, why?’

‘Usually, people from Malana come down to accompany their visitors,’

I did not know what to say. I had no idea if Neharika actually knew someone there or not. There was no way I could explain Neharika’s gut feeling to him. *This boy should ask less questions and focus on his work.*

The boy spoke again, ‘Saab, do not worry, I will get you there timely.’ His voice had conviction. It seemed like he had read my thoughts. I felt a bit relieved after his assurance.

While Boy and I did some small talk, Neharika kept on walking silently ahead of us. She did not ask for any directions from the guide. We stopped in between to relax. The trees around us were fascinating. They were also huge like the deodar trees we had seen at Dhungari temple. I clicked many pictures of the massive trees. Some of these trees were so tall that we could not see their tops, as they vanished into white mist… or clouds.

We reached the Malana gate. Surprisingly it was sunny there. We were above the clouds and mist now. There were some cafeterias right outside Malana’s gate. Before entering the village, we stopped at a café outside the gate for some coffee and a washroom break.

As we reached there, some kids came running towards us.

‘Didi… *Aap Ganja Foonktey ho?* [Sister, do you smoke hash?]

I knew what this village was popular for, but I had not expected even the kids to be included in its business.

Neharika simply smiled and kept walking ahead. Malana was bigger than what I had expected. The houses were few, but they were double or triple-storied. All were made mostly of wood.

‘There is a Devata's temple here,’ Neharika said looking at our guide. The guide looked surprised at her. Probably very few people had asked for something other than Malana Cream.

‘Yes, there is a temple of a Devata named Jamlu. This village’s Devata,’

‘Can we visit it?’ Neharika asked.

‘You can see it from outside, but you need to be very careful there.’ He said.

‘About what?’ I asked him.

‘You must not touch anything there.’

‘I know, we are not supposed to touch the local people or their things. We will be careful about that.’ I said.

‘It is not only people and their things. At the temple, please be careful not to touch any walls, doors or even the tall grass. Just take care not to touch anything at all, around the temple.’

‘What if I accidentally touched a wall?’

‘You will have to pay a fine. Twenty-five hundred rupees for each time you touch it, and they will sacrifice an animal for purifying the temple.’

I sighed. It felt like we were untouchables. It was futile to debate the Village rules because we had to follow them anyway, so we just nodded.

‘The locals also do not touch the temple’s walls. Even the animals are not allowed to touch it,’ The guide continued to confuse us.

‘How will they take the fine from an Animal?’ I asked with a chuckle.

‘They will take it from its owner.’ He replied. To me, all such rules were a way to extract money from the tourists.

‘Do you want to see it? They will not allow us inside. It is only in case of special events and festivals that people visit the temple.’

‘It is ok, we do not need to go inside, the energy is everywhere around the temple.’ Neharika again replied with her cryptic words.

We reached the temple, it was a three-storey building made of Wood, amid a sizeable flat land. The main door on the ground floor was locked. It was decorated with intricate carvings and strange animal horns. I clicked some pictures. The guide signalled me to be discreet about taking photographs. There was a two-storey house near the Temple. The guide told us that it belonged to the temple priest, who was the only man in the village to wear a white turban. The priest had to live alone as per the rules. The

Priest's house was also beautiful with carvings on the wooden door. We were very careful not to touch anything. It felt kind of risky around the temple. An accidental touch could mean reprimand from the villagers and payment of the fine.

Finally, we found a boulder good enough to sit on. I looked at the guide. He said that it was ok to sit there because it was outside the temple premise. I said a silent thanks to Jamlu Devata for allowing us to sit.

It was afternoon, and Neharika was much calmer now. She sat cross-legged on the boulder and closed her eyes. Neharika had spoken many times about Meditation, but I had never seen her do it. It would have been a nice place to meditate if I was into it, and I had some solitude, but Neharika was different.

The weather was pleasant. The cool breeze was blowing gently, with occasional gusts. I clicked some pics of Neharika while she was meditating, to surprise her later. She looked most beautiful. Her face was tranquil. She was still, with soft wind occasionally playing with her hair. I saw a faint hint of a smile in between, probably she was seeing something pleasant in her meditation.

'This place has a lot of energy,' she said as she opened her eyes.

'Are you done with your meditation?'

'I am always meditating,' she said. Again, making no sense to me. I wondered *how someone could meditate all the time, especially while travelling around.*

'Did you get any insights or enlightenment perhaps?' I teased her.

Neharika smiled. It was an all-knowing kind of smile.

'Let's move Varun, I know where I need to go,'

It was one of the rare times when she called me by my name. She seemed excited, she got off the boulder, took my hand and pulled me ahead into the narrow streets of Malana. After passing through narrow lanes between the houses, we reached a small clearing. There was a small hut there. It was much smaller and at a distance from the other larger houses. The guide who was following us was also surprised. It seemed he had never come to this side of the Village. It was like we were in the backyard of the village

‘Where are we going? It is not part of Malana’ The guide spoke.

Neharika saw him, suddenly realising that he was also there.

‘Bhaiya, you can go back now. We know the way from here,’

The guide looked confused. I paid him the money and gestured for him to go. He shrugged and took the money.

‘You must reach Jari before sunset. Do not trek down at night, there are wild animals,’ He gave his advice before leaving. Neharika did not hear any of this. She was walking towards the small hut-type house.

‘Where are we going?’

‘I have to get into this hut,’ Neharika said. She had a wide smile on her face now as if she had found some kind of treasure.

‘Why? Do you know anyone here?’ I asked

‘No… I must see inside, there is something here that draws me, I have seen this place many times in my meditation.’ She circled around the hut and found a small door, which was shut. Neharika knocked on it. Till now, we had not touched anything in the Village. The door was the first thing we touched. As per the village rules, we have now committed a crime, but thankfully there was no one to see us here, except whoever was inside this hut.

No one answered the door. Neharika knocked again. Louder this time.

We heard the creaking sound of someone getting up from a wooden Charpoy. A few seconds later the door opened. An old woman, dressed in traditional attire and wearing a Kullu-style cap, appeared at the door. Her face was covered with deep wrinkles, and her eyes were sunken somewhere within those wrinkles. She probably could not see anything. She spoke something, it was in *Kanashi*, the local dialect, which neither of us knew and also were not *allowed* to speak as per the rules told by the guide.

Neharika did not speak anything, but she kept looking at the woman. In a moment, without any words, the woman nodded and gestured for us to come inside.

The inside smelled like various spices or pickles. On one side there were books. The edges of the books were brown with age. Everything in the

room seemed frozen in time about a hundred years ago, including the old woman who now sat on the charpoy, her invisible eyes on Neharika.

Neharika sat on the floor in front of her. I felt awkward standing, so I also sat along with Neharika. I looked at Neharika, strangely she had tears flowing from her eyes. But she seemed unaware of her crying.

'Parvati Ma, I have been waiting all my life to meet you,' Neharika spoke. I was not getting any of it. I looked at Neharika, but she was miles away from me at that moment. *If she knew this lady here, why did she not tell me about it earlier*.

The old lady's wrinkles formed a curve. She was probably smiling. She simply nodded and did not say anything.

'Ma, will you give me the *prasadam*. I have come a long way looking for it, and you came into my thoughts. You have called me here. Please bless me with it,' Neharika spoke. Everything was a mystery to me. *What was the prasadam? How did this woman call Neharika?*

The lady slowly nodded, and spoke in Hindi with a *Pahari* accent this time, 'Neharika, I knew you would come. I am ready to give it to you. But, please think about it once. You are young, and it will change you forever. Are you ready for it? With it, or without it, life is a blessing either way'

Neharika was still sitting with her hands joined together and close to her chest. Her eyes were glistening with tears, but she was smiling. She nodded her head in response to the old lady.

'Yes, I am ready. I have been waiting for it for years.'

'I knew you would not change your mind, but I had to ask,' the lady said feebly. Her wrinkles stayed curled up in a smile.

The old woman got up. I expected her to use a walking stick, but surprisingly she stood upright. Her movement was slow, but graceful. She touched Neharika on her head, and then walked out from the small door. Neharika and I got up and followed her. The lady was very active for the age she looked. She walked up to the edge of the mountain, from where she slowly descended. From a distance, it appeared like she was walking on air. When we approached the edge, it was a scary view. We were looking at a depth of at least two thousand feet. There was not much vegetation on the

slope. The lady walked down a narrow path cut alongside the mountain and we were supposed to follow her.

I stopped there, calculating my options. There was nothing to hold on to. One slip could mean death with my body remaining undiscovered forever. Neharika kept on walking, she did not lose a moment and started climbing down the narrow path. I had no option but to follow. I walked as cautiously as I could. I felt like a goat climbing down a vertical rocky mountain. The ten or fifteen minutes of the scary walk felt like an hour to me. I thanked my stars for not falling till now. We reached a small room-like clearing carved into the mountain which did not have enough space for us to stand straight. But at least it had good space for us to sit down. The clearing had straight walls. It was clearly a man-made place. It was made by cutting into the mountain. I wondered who could do it, and why?

The old lady walked further into the opening, towards a corner. There she pointed to a small area on the ground. Neharika and I went there. The lady bent and touched a point on the ground. Neharika sat down and started digging the place with her hands. I wondered how Neharika was understanding everything. The ground was soft and slightly wet. After digging for about a minute, Neharika brought out a small herb. It was shaped like a turnip, only very white and much smaller. Neharika gave it to the old lady. The old lady took it into her hands and joined them together. She closed her sunken eyes for a few seconds. It appeared like she was saying some prayer or mantra, but I could not hear anything.

When she opened her hands, she rubbed that turnip-like thing with her fingers. It appeared like a solid thing, but upon rubbing, it broke like a thin eggshell. My eyes widened with surprise at what happened next. The thing inside the shell was emitting light. It was so bright that I could not make out the exact shape. But the way the lady took it out, it must be spherical, the size of a large pearl. She gave it to Neharika, who was still sitting down.

Neharika looked at the thing, and then at the old lady. The old lady nodded.

‘Have it, Neharika, it is the *prasadam* you wanted. Cherish its taste, for it is the last thing you will ever eat.’

Neharika was smiling, the tears were still flowing from her eyes. She slowly brought the thing close to her lips and placed it inside her mouth. She

closed her eyes. For a few moments, she shook, as if she was shivering with cold, then she went unconscious and fell to her side. I held her.

The old lady did not wait to look at Neharika. She started walking back to the narrow path.

‘Wait, what have you done to her?’ I spoke to the old lady. My tone was not very polite now. The lady turned to me. She was unperturbed by my tone.

‘Nothing can happen to her now.’ She said and went ahead on the path. I wanted to run after her to ask what she meant, but I could not leave Neharika lying there.

Neharika was still unconscious. My mind was thinking about the worst. I checked if she was breathing or not. She was breathing, but very slowly. I had to observe very carefully to notice it. Something was surely not right. What did the lady mean by ‘*Nothing can happen to her now*’ Has she killed Neharika? It is only after death that nothing can happen. *Was that shiny thing a poison? Some powerful drug?* So far it was an adventure for me. But now, suddenly it has turned into a nightmare. We were in the strangest of places. A secret hole in a mountain, which probably nobody other than the lady knew about. Even if I yelled for help, no one would hear me. There was no way I could carry Neharika out from there. Even if I managed to carry Neharika up, how will I trek with her up to Jari & get an ambulance. The villagers do not even touch outsiders, how will they help? All the excitement was gone. I was cursing our stupidity of this aimless wandering and gut feeling. We should stick to doing the normal touristy things.

I checked the time. It had been more than fifteen minutes since Neharika had lost consciousness. What had that shiny thing done to Neharika? Why did she eat it? My mind was racing with many thoughts. I thought about various options to bring Neharika at least up to the village. If I carry Neharika over my shoulder, I would have to hold her with one hand at least. There was no way I could walk on that narrow path in that way. I would need both hands free to walk that way. I thought of tying Neharika to my back so that I can have both hands free. Then probably I would be able to climb up walking using my legs as well as hands. I took off my jacket to tie her up.

My bent arm hurt like hell when I tried to lift Neharika to wrap the

jacket around her, but my pain was the last thing on my mind.

As I lifted her a groan escaped my lips, she opened her eyes. I almost fell with relief on seeing her come back to consciousness. I had not realised but tears were falling from my eyes.

‘What happened Varun?’ Neharika spoke.

‘Thankfully, nothing happened. Will tell you more once we get out of here’ I replied. Neharika smile. I wanted to tell her that I had had enough of her all-knowing smiles, these wanderings and wanted no more of this. But at the same time, I was glad that she was okay. She stood up. I offered her water, but she denied it. The walk up the path was still dangerous, but it felt easier than the way down. Neharika, as earlier, was confident, while I walked a bit slowly.

We came up to the hut. Neharika went inside. It was empty.

‘Where did she go?’ I asked.

‘She will not come back now,’ Neharika said. I was again confused, the strange lady and Neharika just happened to know everything, while I was an ignorant bystander.

‘Can you for once tell me what this all is about? I think I deserve that much,’

‘Sure Varun, Come. I will tell you,’ We went inside the small hut, it was empty now, still smelling like spices. Neharika started narrating.

More than a hundred years ago, this lady was a teenage girl. She was an ardent devotee of lord Shiva. One day she accidentally ate a wild herb. From that day onward she never felt hungry. The hours turned to days, and days to weeks, weeks to months. She did not have any desire to eat anything. All she took in was a little water. Her family tried to feed her, sometimes forcefully. But she vomited out anything she ate. She kept working and stayed perfectly healthy. The family had given up on her eating. Everything was alright until the family made one mistake. They mentioned her behaviour to their neighbours.

The news spread in the village. At first, villagers did not believe her and thought that she hid things and ate whenever she was alone. The speculations came to an end when they locked the poor girl in a room with no

food and little water for more than a week. At the end of the week when they opened the room, she was there all healthy. But she changed in that one week. She had no hunger at all but she had anger for the villagers. While confined in that room she meditated, and through meditation, she came to know how it all happened. She knew the exact herb which has made her free from hunger. She planned to tell this to the villagers. But on the last day of her confinement, she was visited by none other than Devi Parvati, Shiva's consort. Devi Parvati told her not to disclose this secret to anyone. For common people, the end of hunger will be the end of life. Without hunger, no one will work. The world will come to a stop. If consumed by the wrong person, it will act as a poison. But since the girl was an ardent devotee of Shiva with a pure heart, she will never ever feel hungry in her life and will remain healthy forever.

'But Ma, what will I do with this life? How can I live forever?' the little girl said with tears in her eyes.

'You have divine power within you now. Whenever you want you can visit any *lok*, and you will be welcome there,'

'But Ma, I do not want to live forever. I will like to leave this world right now,'

'No, you have the divine healing power, you must help the needy with it. I give you my name, you will be known as Parvati from now onward. And one day, a girl will come to you asking for *prasadam*. Give her the herb, make her hunger-free and divine. And then you will leave this world and attain liberation,'

The little girl did as she was asked. She healed the needy people around her. But whenever her popularity increased too much, she moved to a new location. Finally, she came here, outside Malana.

'So, that lady was Parvati, she gave you that magic herb? Means you are free of hunger now? I asked her.

She nodded. This was surreal, I could not believe it.

'Do you believe in this? It is impossible.'

Neharika did not say anything. She just smiled.

'And where is the old lady?' I asked

‘She’s left the world, as Parvati ma had told her’

We climbed down to Jari. By the time we reached Jari, I was tired and famished. Both of us had not eaten anything since morning. Neharika was still full of energy, while I desperately wanted to eat something. At the roadside café at Jari, I ordered two plates of hot noodles and tea for us. I did not talk about the hunger-free thing. I had a gist that at the sight of hot food after long in this cold weather, she will surely forget about the herb thing and dig into the food.

Steaming hot noodles were served. The whiff of tasty masala and cardamom tea increased my hunger and I started eating immediately. But Neharika did not eat or even touch the food.

‘You won’t eat anything?’

‘I do not need it.’

‘At least taste a bit,’

‘I have no hunger left. I am full of energy. I do not even feel a bit tired. Varun, that herb is a divine thing. It is said that it was given to Devi Parvati, by lord Shiva himself. It is known that Shiva has won over hunger, which means he has no hunger at all. The knowledge remained in the Kailash Mountain, till some sages brought it to these mountains of the Himalayas’

‘Can you tell me one thing?’

‘What?’

‘How do you know all this? Who told you?’

Neharika looked at me for a moment.

‘Actually, I do not know. I mean I know, I have always known it somewhere. Like I told you at Dhungari Temple, it is the calling,’ She laughed.

‘When did you know about that woman?’

‘I was drawn to the village and Devata temple, and things became clear after we visited the temple complex. Thereafter on every step, I became sure of where I had to go next. Something like driving a car in the dark with head lights on. We could see a only few meters ahead, but still can keep moving and reach anywhere. By the time I knocked at the hut’s door, I knew

everything,’

There was nothing I could say to that. One thing I am sure of is that Neharika never lied.

I stayed with Neharika for the next three days till we came back to Chandigarh. Again, she was on her bike and I in my car and Neharika did not have any food or water. After the first few times, I stopped asking her. No one could have survived without food or water, but she was there right in front of me, not eating anything and yet living with full energy. The divinity was true.

***

We were in Chandigarh. Neharika was to leave for Delhi, and I was leaving the next day for my home. As usual, we were at our favourite café, where I enjoyed my coffee and Neharika read some books. As I finished my coffee. Neharika came and sat next to me on the sofa seat.

‘Show me your arm,’ she said, gesturing to my defective arm. She had seen it many times earlier, but maybe she got curious again. I extended my arm towards her. It remained as it had always been, slightly bent. She held my arms in both her hands. She moved her hands for a while, which felt a bit ticklish to me, but I remained still. Her hands stopped at my elbow. She held it tightly with both her hands and closed her eyes. I felt the painful tingling again. I winced in pain.

‘Neharika, wait’ I said, and then I felt my elbow getting warm. The warmth was coming from from inside of my elbow. It became like an unbearable heat for a few seconds, but the tingling was gone.

Neharika smiled and took her hands off my arm.

‘My cab is here’ she said checking her phone. We walked out of the café to the cab. She sat in the cab and waved a bye to me. I waved back to her. The cab drove off. When the cab was out of sight, I rested my hand alongside my body. It was not bent any longer. It opened fully and the pain was gone.

THE GUIDING SPIRIT

It was a cold December evening. The official party was going on. It was the party after a long conference at a swanky hotel. Once the conference was over, the guests rushed back to their rooms, changed, and came back for the party. The people from the hosting office, like me, waited for them at the party venue. At such official parties, I usually stay for some time at the start of the party, pretending to be happy and excited to meet my office people, officially marking my attendance for the event. Thereafter, I discreetly slip out and head back to my home. There could be something wrong with me, but being home on time, having a simple meal followed by a book in bed is worth much more than the endless drinking and unnecessary debates.

This hotel was a newly built five-star property with a lovely garden. As I stepped out of the heated conference hall, the cold air welcomed me, making me recall that it was a December night. The air was cold but not stale like the conference room. I decided to have a small walk to see the property before leaving. I walked into the garden which was at a distance from the party hall, but even there, I could hear the muffled music emanating from the party hall. I was wearing a formal suit, which was not enough to be out on a cold December night. I rubbed my hands and breathed into them to feel the warmth.

I did not expect anyone to be out here. But I noticed someone sitting on a corner bench further away from the hall. It was Lucky, my colleague. Lucky was not wearing even his coat over his crisp white conference shirt, and yet he seemed perfectly comfortable there.

‘Lucky, what are you doing here?’ Lucky was also surprised to see me there.

‘Sir, I came here to attend a phone call, but liked the fresh air here, so decided to sit here for a while. It is very boring inside now. How are you here?’

‘I was about to leave for home but thought of taking the longer route through this garden. It is a beautiful place, but a bit cold. Isn’t it?’ Regardless of how cliché it may appear, the weather has been the starting point of many great conversations.

‘This weather is comfortable for me. The temperature remains much lower in my village in Himachal.’

I sat beside him on the bench. We gazed at the building of the hotel in front of us. It looked lovely at night. The yellow-orange glow from the spot lights highlighted its features. There were many lights, even in the garden, but it was dark around the bench where we were sitting. The walking paths in the garden were marked by small lights on both sides. The music from the party-hall got louder, the kind I could not bear inside, but from here it felt pleasant. It seemed like we were at the edge of a different world and looking at another world which has nothing to do with us.

‘Lucky, the other day I really enjoyed our discussion about the fascinating *Devatas* of the hills.’

‘There are many more stories about them. In fact, in each region there will be hundreds of stories about them.’

‘I would love to know more about them. I have also heard about the spirits or ghosts living in the hills. Somewhere the mystery and hills are synonymous. Have you heard of any such story?’

‘There are many such stories. Every village in Himachal would have a few. I cannot say that all are true. Most are hallucinations or exaggerations. But I can tell you about one true story. I am sure that this one is true because it happened with my brother about a few years ago,’

‘You mean… your real brother?’ I asked

‘Yes, my real elder brother, Dharminder. You have met him once when he came to our office a few months ago.’

I nodded.

‘At that time, he lived in Chandigarh, attending college. Whenever there were college vacations or a long weekend, he went back to our village in Himachal.’

I kept nodding and Lucky continued.

‘At that time Dharminder was studying in his second year of college. It was the month of December. Our sister Aashi’s birthday is also in December. That year, her birthday was further connected with a long weekend. So, it was an ideal time for Dharminder to visit back home. To surprise Aashi on her birthday, he decided to reach home a day earlier.

Usually, he boarded the morning bus from the city which reached, near our Village in the afternoon. From there he could reach home before the sunset. You remember, our village is not on the road. It takes a trek for about an hour to reach there from the bus stop.’

‘Yes, I remember. It is one hour for you, and about two for people like me,’ I recalled Lucky had invited me to attend a wedding in his village. That trek took me more than two hours.

‘Yes, for my brother it was a maximum of one hour. He is much stronger than me.’

I nodded, gesturing for him to continue. It was cold, but I wanted to listen to the full story. I crossed my arms with my hands tucked under them to keep warm.

‘So he preferred the morning bus, but due to some unexpected work at his college, he got delayed that day. The next day was Aashi’s birthday, and he wanted to reach a day earlier. So, instead of travelling the next day, he decided to take the late afternoon bus, which was supposed to reach our village stop at around eleven in the night. In this case, he would have to trek in the dark. But he knew that trek so well that he could do it in the dark too’

‘You know sir, there are some days when nothing goes right. For Dharminder, it was exactly that kind of day, he was late for catching the morning bus, and on top of that, this bus had a gear malfunction on the way, so it crept at a very slow speed all the way up to about thirty kilometres before the stop for our Village. It was almost eleven at night. The driver decided that it cannot continue any further. Due to the gear malfunction, it consumed more fuel and the next petrol pump was about ten kilometres ahead. There was a risk of the bus stalling in between on the road at night. Moreover, that petrol pump was closed at night, so it had to wait till morning. So here Dharminder was stranded in a different village, about thirty

Kilometres away from our village.’

By now there were about fifteen passengers on the bus, including my brother. After some discussions among themselves, all the passengers decided that it was better to spend the night in this village than getting stalled in the middle of nowhere. They got off the bus. That was the wise thing to do. They went into the village along with the bus conductor. The conductor arranged for the stay of the passengers in a temple’s hall.

My brother was frustrated with the turn of events. It would have been much better if he had dropped the plan to travel and took the morning bus the next day. But what was done was done. He stopped for a while near the bus for a smoke. He thought about the situation. He was about thirty kilometres from the village. That was the road distance. If he considered the narrow pathways through the forests, it could be about a five- or six-kilometres trek. Such a trek would normally take only about two hours for him during daytime. He was familiar with the last part of the trek, which was usual for reaching our village. He could trek the last part in the night too, but he was not confident about the trek from this village up to that part.

It was a little before midnight. The thought of being at home in his bed within two or three hours was very tempting. It was only five or six kilometres. But he was not sure if he would find the way in the dark. There was some light at the bus stop, but a few meters down the road it was inky blackness. Dharminder turned around and came back to the bus stop. The passengers and conductor were gone. Suddenly everything was silent and Dharminder was alone at that now deserted bus stop. The light source was a solitary filament bulb at the corner of the bus stop casting a dim illumination. Dharminder looked at the bus, it looked like a weathered old man, tired from the journey it had endured. He was thinking about giving up hope to reach home before morning when he heard a sound. It was the clink of some light metal item being placed on the ground. My brother looked around, he could see no one. Then he heard another faint clink sound.

It was coming from the other side of the bus, the one towards the road. When he walked around the bus, he saw a man with a kerosene lantern sitting on a stone. My brother had seen nothing while coming back to the bus stop when the bus was visible to him from the front. But given the low light and night, he believed he could have missed. Everyone else was gone. It was

only that man and my brother at the bus stop now. The man was hunched over the ground and was very carefully adjusting the wick of the lantern he had kept on the floor. The clinking sound was from the lantern being kept on the ground.

'Hello *Bhaisaab*,' My brother went to him and spoke.

The man looked up and smiled, 'Hello Dharmu,'

That is when my brother saw the man's face. He was glad to see a familiar face. It was Kakaram from our village. He was old, possibly older than my father. Even if not particularly close, seeing someone familiar away from home gives a sense of comfort.

'Kakaram Uncle, were you also on the bus?' my brother said after recognising him.

'No, I just happened to come to this village. I had planned to take the bus ahead. But it came too late, and now it is not going ahead as you know,' he said.

'Yes kaka, I am also stuck. I had planned to reach home at the earliest.' My brother said, frustration was clear in his voice.

Kakaram did not say anything, he kept looking at Dharminder, deep in his thoughts.

'I wish I could. It would not have been an issue if it was a day. I am clear about the trail from our Village stop, but before that, I am not sure if I can find the correct way at night,' My brother spoke again.

'Perhaps…you should spend the night here in this village' Kakaram suggested.

'I think I will have to. But I wanted to surprise Aashi in the morning. It is her birthday tomorrow.' Dharminder said with a sigh. Kakaram was silent for a while, standing still. It was his normal style. He took long pauses but always thought before speaking. Due to his wisdom many people in the village went to him for advice or consultation on a variety of topics including crops, animals, and even on spiritual matters.

'I am familiar with every trail in this area. I have been walking on these trails for three days. I know every bit and corner. If you want, I will get

you there, but you must follow me properly,' Kakaram assured. Perhaps he had sensed my brother's strong desire to be at home before morning. It was correct that he knew a lot about these trails and routes. He had been travelling in these areas for long, many times walking through the trails. Although, my brother and I belong to the same area and we do know all the main routes, but now it has been years since we are working here in the city so our knowledge may be greater than some outsiders, but it was not enough to navigate those tricky trails at night. For that, we also need local guidance… from someone like Kakaram.

The possibility of reaching home before morning excited my brother. But at the same time, he thought about how unfair it would be for Kaka, as he was old and deserved to sleep at night rather than trek with him.

'No Kaka, it is better you have some rest,' My brother said.

In response to that, Kakaram let out a hearty laugh. 'Such talk does not suit us. Have you become like those urban weaklings?' This was partially true. Trekking and hard work comes naturally to our people in the village, and adding the clean fresh air, and organic food of hills to that, it results in much healthier bodies. The air had some warmth and the sky was clear. Other than some occasional gusts of wind, it was calm. My brother, who was desperate to reach home, agreed to Kaka.

As they were about to walk, my brother heard a thud of the bus door closing. It was the conductor who had come to check and lock the bus. My brother looked back. The conductor was walking towards them.

'Bhai, where are you going? Did you not get a place in the temple? Come, you can stay with me.' The conductor said.

Kakaram and my brother looked at each other to see if any of them had changed their mind and wanted to stay. Kakaram shook his head and walked a step away. He did not want to stay.

'No bhai, our village is nearby and we will be there in an hour. Thank you for the offer,' my brother said.

'But… will you be able to do it at night?'

'Yes, no issue, Kaka knows all the ways very well. We will leave now and do not want to be delayed further. Thank you bhai,' my brother said and

they turned to move.

‘You are going at your own risk. No responsibility of the bus company,’ The conductor spoke loudly.

My brother and Kaka laughed.

‘Conductor *Ji* be assured, it is our own risk,’ My brother replied loudly, now farther away from him. The conductor looked confused. His confusion was justified because people rarely travelled by foot at night. When my brother looked back from the next turn, the conductor was still standing there, looking at him. Undeterred, my brother and Kakaram continued walking away.

Once they were further away from the village, they were surrounded by complete silence, broken only by the rhythmic sound of their footsteps. For the first few hundred meters they walked alongside the metalled road. Kaka was carrying his lantern, and my brother turned on the small flashlight of his phone. It was not of much use to see anything, but it was a safety measure to ensure they were visible to any passing vehicles on the road. However, no vehicle crossed them.

After walking alongside the road for about fifteen minutes they reached the begining of the trail. Leaving the metalled road, they began walking on the trail through the forest. The trails were tricky but my brother and Kakaram were not afraid of that, both had the experience of walking on those trails. At times, my brother was not sure of the way, but he was glad that Kakaram was with him. Kakaram walked ahead slowly but confidently. Even with a dim lantern he walked with confident long strides as if it was daytime and my brother followed him. It was so dark that when Kaka walked a few steps ahead, my brother could see only the dimly lit lantern swinging ahead lighting up a small part of the ground. It looked like the lantern was floating in the air, swinging, and moving by itself. It was mainly the lantern which guided my brother’s path. Kakaram did not talk for long periods of time. But that did not bother my brother, as Kakaram had always been like this. And, my brother is also not much of a talker.

It was about a quarter past midnight when they came to a wide clearing. It was near some village in between. While walking through the clearing, Kakaram suddenly stopped. My brother thought that Kakaram had stopped to look for him, but he did not look back. Instead, he was looking at

something on the ground bringing his lantern down to the ground as if he was trying to find something. For my brother, it was impossible to see much beyond the light of his lantern, and yet Kakaram kept standing there, looking carefully into the darkness.

‘Kakaram, what happened? Something wrong?’ My brother asked. At first, he thought Kakaram may be trying to scare him with some prank. But that did not really fit Kakaram’s character. Kakaram was a serious man.

My brother asked again, but Kakaram did not reply. He kept on looking at something in the blackness ahead.

‘Are you not sure about the way?’ Now my brother was getting worried. Kakaram seemed to have lost the path, and my brother had no idea about their location and further route to his village, or even back to the first village.

Kakaram looked at my brother and gestured for him to stay silent. My brother was confused now. It seemed like Kakaram was trying to hear something. It may be some animal. My brother also tried to notice the sounds. When you try hard to hear something very faint in silence, your mind starts making sounds and you are not sure if what you are hearing is real or not. My brother heard faint sounds of nasal breathing. He held his breath for a moment to listen carefully. The sound was still there, like someone was snoring lightly. There was no house nearby. The sound seemed to be emanating from the ground. My brother’s first thought was that probably some animals were sleeping on the ground, and Kakaram was trying to avoid stepping on them.

After a while, Kakaram smiled, like he had found what he was looking for.

‘Dharmu, we must walk that way, but try to remain silent. And follow me exactly step by step, do not wander at all. If you feel something touching or holding your feet. Do not look down… and try to keep walking,’

‘Kaka, what kind of animals are sleeping there?’ My brother asked but not loudly. Kakaram did not say anything.

Then Kakaram started walking ahead, this time he walked slower than his normal pace. The ground was wet and slippery at places. And my brother followed him strictly as advised. They must have walked about ten steps

when Kaka stepped aside, changing his path a bit as if he was avoiding something on the ground. My brother who was following Kakaram closely now, missed the change in path and walked straight ahead. On his next step, his foot got stuck in something on the ground. He looked down and fell face forward. His face landed into a cold pale of water. Suddenly the faint snoring sounds stopped. For a moment there was no sound… even the crickets had stopped chirping. My brother tried to see where his foot was stuck, but it was too dark. He felt like he had stepped onto some heavy animal, either alive or a carcass. If alive, that animal must have grabbed his leg. But it was not moving like an animal. My brother thought it may be some semi-rotten carcass of an animal lying there. He tried to pull his foot free, but it was stuck strongly. As he tried to get up, something crawled up on his back. It was so heavy that it pinned my brother to the ground.

My brother is not a weakling, but this was something totally unexpected and unprecedented. It was totally dark, he could not even see anything, and he was in the midst of a clearing in the Jungle at night… pinned to the wet ground. My brother was thinking if he was attacked by some animal, but the touch did not feel like an animal. And there was no reason for the animal to sit on him. It was like a heavy lump of flesh crushing him. My brother was shivering with fear. He used all his strength to turn and look at the creature on his back. All he could see was the two faintly glowing eyes above his back, looking at him. My brother looked ahead. He could not see Kakaram anywhere.

In a few seconds, my brother felt more weight on him. More creatures were on his body now. Every breath was a struggle for him now. He could feel the weight on his legs, back and even shoulders. He heard giggling. Whatever was sitting on him, was giggling and jumping. The giggling multiplied. It was more than ten or fifteen different creatures giggling, some like a baby, some like the squeaks of a newborn, some of the toddlers and others clearer like a six- or a seven-year-old child’s laugh.

The creatures on him were jumping. When he tried to turn again, he screamed with pain. Two tiny hands emerged from the ground and pulled his head, holding his ears towards the ground. He could not lift his head. He tilted his head to breathe. His nose was in the water now, and he was managing to breathe in through half of his mouth. He tried to spit out the muddy water, but as he had to keep his mouth open to breathe, the muddy

water would enter his mouth again. He was getting breathless. He could not open his eyes, as they were pressed by hands pulling him by ears.

The ground beneath him was soft and was giving away with the jumps of creatures. He was sinking in the ground like a nail being hammered into soft wood. His movement got more and more restricted with each passing second. Cold water seeped into his clothes. He felt nails digging into his skin. He screamed with pain. He was sunk into the ground up to his waist. 'Ka..ka..ram' he yelled as best he could with half his mouth full of muddy water.

'I told you to be careful Dharmu' My brother heard kakaram's voice. But he could not speak anything now. His mouth was pressed to the muck. He could taste the combination of wet mud and grass in his mouth. He was going to drown.

'Keep still Dharmu, keep your eyes closed,' Kakaram said. My brother did not feel Kakaram pulling him out. Instead, he heard a strange incomprehensible voice amid the giggling. Kakaram was chanting something. His voice felt very different. It was throaty and echoing. My brother could feel the vibrations of the sound. No doubt he was terrified, but the presence of Kakaram kept his hopes alive. The sound felt like it was warming him up from the inside.

He did not feel Kakaram pulling away the things on his back. The beings had stopped jumping now. One by one the weights went away, and my brother could lift his head and get up. Whatever it was, Kakaram had freed him from its deadly grasp.

My brother felt like his bones were broken under the weight, but he could get up. As soon as he got up, he started running away from the place. Kakaram was already ahead. Once at a distance, my brother turned and looked back. It was pitch black. He turned on his phone's flashlight. His phone was also wet, but luckily it was still working. There were heavy stones placed in an array. In some places, there were small metal cages. It looked like a graveyard, but there were no crosses. He tried to see the spot where his foot was stuck. It was a small patch of slightly raised ground. There was nothing which could hold or entangle his foot.

My brother had heard about the stories of spirits of young children, called *Tengu* in the local language. But he never believed them. At that

moment those stories came back to him. Once a man from our village had a bite mark on his leg, which he claimed to be a *Tengu's* bite. The mark did not resemble any animal bite. It had two uneven arch shapes like a human child's bite. He said that a *'Tengu' or Chota Bhoot* (Small Ghost) clung to his leg, while he was walking in the forest at night. The man also said that the *Tengu* had a faint reddish glow in the dark. It was like this dense, red uneven shaped flesh, squeezing his leg. Even with all his power he could not free his leg until *Tengu* had its share of blood. At that time my brother had thought of this as a prank or a drunk person's story. It was said that since these were the spirits of the young, they tend to be naughty and stubborn, just like kids. These stories sounded like lies, or just interesting gossip as long as they happened to someone else, but now it all appeared true to my brother.

The flashlight of my brother's phone was not enough to see farther than a few meters, yet he saw something moving in the corner of his eye. As he turned, he saw a very faint red light which seemed to have sprouted out of the ground a few meters away from him. The light was like an odd-shaped but large pumpkin. It was the *Tengu*.

In no time, several other lights appeared on the burial ground. The lights began to move slowly towards him. My brother felt an electric charge rising in his body, and his adrenalin levels were pumped up. He tried to move but he was immobilised with fear.

'Move fast Dharmu. Run.,' Kakaram's voice broke his stance.

'Follow me, fast,' the voice said again.

Once again, my brother started following the lantern, this time much faster.

All covered in mud, my brother walked as fast as he could, but the lantern kept ahead of him. Kakaram was walking faster.

My brother dashed ahead to catch up, but could not catch up with the lantern. It kept moving as fast as him. Despite his age, Kakaram kept ahead of my brother. They must have run continuously for about a minute. Running on a hilly trek is very different. The path is serpentine with many twists and turns as well as ups and downs. It is like climbing up, turning, going down… all at once. In his jerky run, one of my brother's shoes slipped off. He did not stop to pick it up and continued to run.

My brother could not keep up with the twists in the path and tripped on something. Unfortunately, he could not control his fall and fell towards a slope. While slipping down, tried grasping onto anything with his hands. But all he got were some dried leaves and bruised elbows. His fall was broken by a tree about ten feet below. His shoulder and head hit something hard. He felt intense pain. Later, he came to know that his shoulder was broken at that time. He saw faint red objects grabbing his legs, pulling him down. He thought that it was the end of him. He saw a glimpse of Kakaram's face which quickly vanished after looking at him. At that time my brother did not think about how Kakaram came ten feet down the slope to look at him. He just chanted our Devata's name before fainting.

It was the next morning when my brother gained consciousness, he was at our gram Devata's temple compound. He was lying on a hard wooden bed, and there was a thick blanket on him. His head was bandaged, and his arm was wrapped up in a cloth that was tied around his neck to support it and restrict its movement. Our father, as well as the temple priest and medium, were seated next to his bed. When my brother tried to get up, he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. My father told him to keep lying.

The temple priest informed my brother that the medium had awoken him in the middle of the night and informed him that Devata had spoken to him. The devata had told him that you were lying on the steps outside the temple.

'He asked me to bandage your head and get you a blanket. When we arrived, you were unconscious on these steps. Devata had also told through the medium that someone had called on Devata to rescue you.' The priest said.

My brother estimated that they were at least three kilometres away from the Devata's temple when he had fallen into a slope. *Then how did he reach the temple? Kakaram alone couldn't pull him out of that ditch and bring him to the temple.*

'What was the time?' When did you get up and come here to find me?'

'It was half an hour past midnight,'

'Are you certain?'

‘I did check the time when I got up,’ Looking at his wristwatch, the priest stated.

My brother remembered that they were at the burial ground at around a quarter past midnight, and his feet getting stuck. Then they ran away from the *Chota bhoots.* This all must have taken around fifteen minutes, which means it must be around half past midnight when he fell. *Then how could he reach the temple at the same time?*

Shortly the village doctor arrived and looked at my brother’s wounds. My brother realised that it was Devata’s power which had brought him to the temple at night. But who has called Devata to rescue him? Did someone pray for him?

‘Dharmu, how did this happen?’

‘I think I was caught by *Tengus*. Many of them,’ My brother could not believe himself saying this.

Everyone looked at each other.

‘Where?’

‘We were on the trek to our village… there was a clearing, it had strange stones and some cages on the ground.’

‘Oh, that must be a graveyard for children. They keep stones and cages to save them from wild animals,’ The priest spoke.

My brother looked at him with surprise.

‘Graveyard, but there are not many Christians in this region,’

‘No, not for Christians. Hindus do not cremate in case of death at a young age, they bury them,’ my father told him.

‘Then what happened?’ The priest asked.

‘My foot got stuck somewhere on the ground and I fell. Then, they were all over me. My legs, back and my face. They were pulling me into the ground.’

‘Who?’

‘Strange creatures, I think they were *Tengus*, they were jumping on me. There were hands, pulling my head into the ground. I tried my best but I

could not shake them off.'

'Did you see them? The *Tengus*?' The medium asked me.

'I do not know what it was, but it did feel like *Tengus*, as some people had described earlier. What are these *Tengus*? Why did they attack me?' My brother asked Medium.

'Spirits of children who died young. Many times, they do not even know that they have died and they remain confused. They latch on to people for their basic hunger, and sometimes they are trying to get back to their homes searching for their parents. Being children, they are stubborn. If a child is after you for something, he is more persistent than adults.'

My brother nodded. This explained their sticky behaviour.

'How did you get free from them and reach here at night?'

'Kakaram came, and helped me. I do not know how he managed. He just came and chanted something and they, the *Tengus*, left me. Then I got up and started running. I followed Kakaram, but I fell again, down a slope. I saw Kakaram before I lost consciousness. Then, I have found myself here. I am surprised how Kakaram managed to climb down to me. Where is Kakaram? Did he go home?' My brother asked.

The medium and priest both looked at my brother and then at my father.

'Kakaram?'

'Kakaram, the old trader of the village. The father of the one who runs the grocery shop.'

'That Kakaram?' the medium spoke.

'Yes, we were together last night.'

Everyone around my brother looked at each other, not understanding. My brother was confused at their strange behaviour. When he asked about Kakaram again, my father spoke.

'Dharmu, Kakaram died three days ago. He was coming back home from the other village when he died of a heart attack. He was cremated a day before yesterday,'

Then it all dawned upon my brother. It was Kakaram’s spirit who guided him, saved him, and then called Devata for helping him.

A FORBIDDEN-TO-SEE MARE

(Based on a True Event)

It had been five years since I had travelled such a long distance by bus. And it was my first bus trip to the hills. From Delhi, it took eight hours for the bus to reach Kullu. I had been drifting in and out of sleep till the time the bus was on plain roads. Then it arrived in the hills and began negotiating the curvy, narrow hill roads. A sharp turn of the bus jolted me awake. For the most part of the journey, the road ran alongside the Beas River. It was a lovely view. On the final leg of our journey, we were in for a lot of twists and turns, including some blind U-turns. At some points where the road was narrow, the bus had to stop and wait, to let the vehicle from the other side to pass first. Even with the expertise in driving, these roads required good experience to be driven on, and our driver seemed to be well experienced.

It was beautiful outside. I clicked some photographs of the scenery from the moving bus with my phone camera. But the results on the screen were nowhere near the actual beauty of the place. I deleted those photographs.

I clicked some more photographs when the bus was stationary for some time at a stop. Those photos were better but still did not justify the beauty which was there before my eyes. The beauty was more than what one could capture through a picture, it was also in the sounds as well as in the silence. It was also in the fresh air getting into my lungs. To experience all this, no photo or video camera will suffice, one must come here and experience it personally.

The bus I was travelling in was a ‘Deluxe’ bus, and the seats reclined a bit, yet I was growing weary of sitting for a long time. Eight hours is a long time for any seat to remain comfortable. I was beginning to regret my hasty decision to come here.

During an office break, I told Lucky, my colleague, that I am fascinated by the hills and I have visited Shimla, Kasauli, Nainital, and Mussoorie. At that time, I did not know that Lucky hailed from a small village in the hills near Kullu in Himachal Pradesh. He claimed that what I had seen was beautiful, but it was not the real hills. And if I want to experience the authentic essence of the hills, I would have to visit his village. I do not know what came over me, and I agreed to visit his village. In fact, I was excited. He had planned for a leave of absence to visit his home and I planned to join him there two days later.

To ensure that I could not miss my stop by mistake, I had told both the bus driver and bus conductor several times to drop me off at the location from where I could walk to the Tinder village. They just smiled and told me not to worry. The village's name, Tinder, has no link with the dating app of the same name. It exists in Himachal Pradesh's Kullu district long before the app. After a long bus ride from Delhi, it takes another three-hour trek to reach this village, which includes crossing a rivulet.

The conductor was attentive to my requests, and he told me a minute before my stop. I was the only one getting off the bus at that location. When we arrive in the hills, especially at such spots away from the popular tourist spots, silence is the first thing we notice. The time felt still, like someone has pressed a pause button on all the hustle and bustle of life. Once the bus had left, all I could hear was some birds chirping.

While I was stretching before embarking on the long trek, I heard footsteps approaching me. It was Lucky. I had requested him not to come as it was a three-hour walk on one side.

Still, I was relieved to see him. I had started to get doubts on the trail to follow, and as there was no one at stop to ask for directions, I was planning to speak to him over the phone.

'Hello Lucky'

'Hello Sir'

'I told you I will come by myself, you could have saved three hours of the day,' I spoke, while hugging him warmly.

'Three hours for you, but only one hour for me,' he said with pride in his voice. I nodded. He was correct about that.

Lucky had anticipated that I would be hungry at this time. He brought a thermos of hot tea, some paper cups and some pakoras. We sat on a fallen tree trunk nearby to enjoy the scenery while sipping hot masala tea from our paper cups. It was the most refreshing tea I had ever had.

‘Is Tinder up there?’ I asked Lucky, pointing towards the hill in front of us.

‘Yes, it is up there,’ Lucky said, pointing to the hill up ahead.

‘From where do we begin the trek?’

He held my arm pointing upward, and pulled it down ‘From down there,' showing the river at the foot of the hill, he continued, ‘First we trek down, cross the river and then climb up,’

He offered to carry my bag, but I declined. It was a small backpack, with some clothes and my laptop. I had planned to stay for two nights. We started our trek by descending towards the river.

From the road, the river looked like a tiny trickle wading through the rocks, but as we climbed down, it became noisier and bigger. We removed our shoes and carried them in our hands and drew our trousers up to our knees before wading through the river. The water was cool and refreshing. The riverbed’s smooth stones massaged my tired feet. We clicked some pictures of each other with our feet submerged in water. It must have taken about two or three minutes to cross the river. It was an excellent way to begin the trek. This wading through the water reminded me of the small pools at the entrance to some holy places that cleaned the dirt off the feet before they entered as if the hill were a sacred shrine. Such a location in the city would attract thousands of people every day eventually destroying the beauty, but here it was only two of us.

There was a very faint and distant hum of the vehicles on the road which became increasingly inaudible as we continued, deepening the silence. Aside from my slightly heavy breath, we could hear the crunching of dry leaves under our feet and the occasional chirp of a bird. It was cold and the sky was overcast, but there was no rain or snow.

It was afternoon when we arrived in the village. I was exhausted. Lucky, on the other hand, was still bursting with energy. A few chairs were placed in an open area amid a group of houses. Lucky introduced me to the

family members including his father, mother, and elder brother. There were other people too, and all welcomed me heartily. I estimated that there were around thirty houses in the village, most of them much bigger than any average city apartment. I believe the entire village was aware of a visitor within a few hours. It was not a special treatment for me, it was for everyone from outside who visits there because the village was a close-knit family.

Within a couple of hours, the day had turned dark. Lucky took me to a spot where we could see the sunset. The edge of the horizon was weakly lit with the sun somewhere under the clouds giving it tones of yellow and red. The view was breathtakingly beautiful. I clicked many pictures there. Each one was good for setting as a phone or laptop wallpaper. Slowly the valley, the road and the river below faded into a grey mist, and the sky became a mix of pink, light purple and blue with just a golden line in the west. Sitting there for a few minutes and sipping the special tea made me forget my fatigue. The tea was like an energy drink for me. It had not snowed yet, but it was bitterly cold. I was wearing the warmest of my jackets, keeping my hands thrust deep in the pockets, or rubbing them together to prevent them from getting numb. Looking at my discomfort Lucky lent me a pair of gloves, while he was not wearing any himself.

I saw smoke rising from the village behind me. It reminded me that today was the thirteenth of January, the *Lohri* festival.

‘Is that a *Lohri* bonfire?’

Lucky looked at the smoke, which shone like gold in the yellow evening sunlight.

‘Yes, they have started it.’ Lucky said, nodding.

‘Isn’t it too early, I mean in the city, we start the Lohri celebrations when it is fully dark, around nine pm, and then it goes on up to midnight or even later.’

‘No sir, here we do not stay out at night, especially tonight,’

I was intrigued. But before I could ask Lucky the reason, a child called us to join the festivity.

The celebration was short. We had some sweets made of Jaggery and sesame seeds, which are traditional sweets for the Lohri festival. We

circumvented the bonfire while throwing some sesame seeds into it. I was enjoying the festivity, but very soon one of the elderly signalled others to get up. Everything was quickly packed up and people went back to their houses hurriedly.

Within the next half an hour, the rest of the little sunlight had completely gone. Darkness had set in, but not the kind of darkness found in cities. It is never completely dark in the Cities. Even in the power cuts the houses remain lit with the power back-ups, and the passing cars will keep lighting the streets. Lucky's house was on an edge of the mountain, offering a view of distant mountains and valleys below. But at night all it offered was complete darkness underneath, it felt like we were hanging somewhere between the earth and the sky. By now a thick blanket of fog had engulfed the village, even the stars were not visible. I thought, *what if someone needed to move out in such darkness.* I felt cut off from the outside world. I was confident that, at least for the night, I can not be disturbed here.

After a scrumptious early dinner, I was shown to my room. It was a wood-furnished room on the upper floor of Lucky's house. The house was much larger than my city apartment. The room had a window opening towards the far away mountains.

'Do you like it?' Lucky inquired.

'Like it?... I love it, everything is so beautiful… so dream-like'

'Aren't you tired? Don't you want to get some sleep?'

'Actually, I was, but that scrumptious meal and the fresh mountain air have replenished my energy.' I wanted to make the most of my time here, so sleep was the last thing on my mind.

'My cousins and friends are planning a bonfire. Tomorrow is Sunday so we are planning to have some fun… there will be drinks, do you want to join?'

The weather, location, and situation all called for a bonfire. A chat around a bonfire, in the middle of the night, is likely to be a memorable one. 'Sure, why not? But you were saying that everyone stays indoors, especially on *Lohri'* I exclaimed.

'Sir, we are planning this bonfire inside… within the premises of a

house. That is allowed. It is nearby, just the third house from here. We can stay there up to a little past midnight. Thereafter you can come back here'

'Interesting rules.' I commented.

'Sir…' Lucky was going to say something, but stopped.

'What?'

'Not important, we can talk about it there… around the bonfire.' He spoke.

A bonfire was lit in the middle of a large house's courtyard. It was an old-Style house with rooms all around and a courtyard with a grassy lawn in the middle. It was Lucky's uncle's place. His uncle had left for another village, so it was an ideal location for a party. Chairs were arranged around the bonfire. Lucky had arranged some refreshments and snacks. Other than Lucky and me, there were three more people. Lucky introduced me to them. I thanked all of them for their hospitality and told them how much I loved the beauty of the village and its peaceful environment.

The two boys looked younger than Lucky. They were his cousins Anil and Bhupi, who had the vibe of always being up for a party or getting up to mischief. The next person was an older guy, Somnath who worked in the police department and looked a bit serious.

The mood was set, the weather was cold and dark, and we had a nice bonfire crackling in front of us. Such an environment called for lots of interesting conversations.

I started, 'I have heard about many mysteries around hills… the unexplained phenomena, which is very rare in cities like Delhi. Do you know about anything like that?' We were sitting in the middle of an old house, with many empty rooms around us. There was a spooky feeling around us, and I somehow wanted to enhance it.

'Sir, the Himalayas will remain full of mysteries. See, a major part of the Himalayas is untouched. There are places no one has stepped on… or seen. I mean you cannot find *any* such place in Delhi. Some places are not even covered by Google maps… like hidden caves.' Lucky said.

'*Bhai*, see this village of ours. It covers a small part of the hills. There are about thirty houses. The rest of it is jungle… no road, no lights, just dark

jungle. The nearest police station is at two hours of walking… Suppose anything happens in the village… a murder or something… a lot can happen before police can reach here,' Somnath said laughing. I found this information a bit unsettling.

Somnath continued, 'Also, hunting is an illegal activity in this region. Everyone knows that. But still, it happens all the time. All the villagers have salted wild Deer hanging upside down in their basements, which they have hunted themselves. No police can stop that. There is one freshly hunted, hanging in this house as well'

I imagined the dead body of a wild animal hanging somewhere in the dark basement of the house.

'Oh, you know, Mandi side, there was a man who was missing for ten years, and when he came back, he said that he was abducted by a Churel' Anil said.

'Really?' I said.

'Yes, he said that she married him by force, and even had children with him.'

'Wow… I wonder what kind of children a man and a *Churel* will have… human or *Churel-Bhoot* types… ha-ha… that is interesting,' I said.

'Oh, he must be just scared of his wife… and thought of her as a *Churel*,' Somnath said. Everyone laughed. That could be a possibility.

'There are many haunted places. Especially the places where Britishers had settled before independence. Like, in Shimla, there are tunnels, mansions, and schools which are considered haunted. One of them is called *Churel Baudi*. It is on Shimla Highway. A *Churel*, in a white sari, will ask for a lift if you drive through that place at night,' Bhupi said.

'Oh yes, Lady in a white sari asking for a lift seems like a classic. There is a road in Gurgaon, where people have reported such a lady asking for a lift,' I added.

'That may be because of those old movies, where the ghost is always a lady in a white saree…' Somnath said.

'Is there any haunted place nearby?' I asked.

‘There are many stories of spirits living in the Jungle area, some people have seen dead people on that side’ Lucky said, pointing to the wall behind me. I turned and looked at the wall hoping no dead people were sitting or walking there.

‘The village crematorium is there, just behind those rooms’ Somnath said pointing to the rooms behind me.

A crematorium was behind me. I picked up my chair and changed my location to the other side of the bonfire.

‘I would rather like to face a ghost than let it catch me unaware from behind,’ I said looking at the dark row of rooms and imagining a crematorium behind it. I did not believe in Ghosts, but still, I preferred to stay at a distance from the crematorium… especially at night. Maybe it was the effect of the dark night and the empty house. Everyone laughed. My behaviour made them less formal with me.

‘Oh, as you are interested in such a phenomenon, you are in for an experience today…’ Bhupi said with excitement as he recalled something interesting. Anil looked at him in confusion.

‘Today is Lohri’ Bhupi said.

‘Oh yes, today is the day’ Anil said, now he was as excited as Bhupi.

‘What about Lohri?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes…Lohri… No one will leave this house until at least two am.’ Somnath said. I thought it was a joke, but his tone indicated that he meant it.

‘Someone please explain what's going on?’ I queried.

‘Today is Lohri festival night, and every year on this night, a mare comes to the village and no one should see it,’ Lucky explained. I fixed my gaze on him. I wanted to know more.

‘It is forbidden to look at it. That is the reason people celebrate the Lohri early and stay indoors’ Lucky looked at me. He had finally answered my query. But there were more questions in my mind now.

‘Forbidden…Why? What exactly is the big deal about seeing a mare?’ I had not anticipated anything like this. I was expecting some stories, not to be a part of one.

‘Anyone who sees it dies,’ Lucky declared.

Everyone went silent for a while, only the fire crackled.

‘I do not understand. If no one is allowed to see it, no one will leave, how do we know there is a mare outside?’ I was excited to see it.

‘It walks around the Village houses wearing *Ghungroos* (Anklet with metallic bells, usually worn by dancers) and anyone who is awake and willing to listen can hear the *Ghungroo* sound. It is said that it goes to each house, looking for its prey’ One of Lucky's friends pitched in.

‘Why does it wear *Ghungroos*? What does it prey on? I think horses do not attack humans… do they?’ My curiosity piqued, I inquired.

‘*Ghungroos* are common accessories for the Horses or Mares… and it does not directly attack, it preys on the soul, the life energy of a man. The moment a man sees it, it starts stealing the life energy of that man,’ Somnath said.

I suppressed a chuckle. But everyone else had a straight face. It was absurd. I thought that they were trying to pull a prank on me. But if they were serious, I felt pity for them for believing in a silly story. When I looked at my watch, it was almost Eleven.

‘Will we be able to hear the *Ghungroo* sound tonight?’ I asked.

Lucky confirmed, ‘Yes, around midnight… it will come.’

‘That's fantastic. It'll be fun,’ I said, rubbing my hands together in excitement.

‘Sir, if you feel like it, I will arrange your stay here itself. I am also planning to stay here tonight.’ Lucky said.

‘I do not mind. In fact, it will be fun with you guys’

The house was large and empty, with plenty of rooms for us to sleep in, so staying there was not a problem. I, on the other hand, was desperate to see the mare or the prankster who had terrified the entire village.

We chatted on various topics including magical lakes, temples, and hauntings. I was spooked but also thoroughly enjoying it. The conversations were so interesting that we did not know when it was past midnight.

Suddenly Bhupi jumped up and gestured for everyone to remain silent and listen carefully. What we heard was unmistakably the clinking sound of *Ghungroos* and horse's hooves tapping on the ground. It was just after midnight. The sound of a horse walking at a slow pace. The sound stopped just outside the main door of the house. We approached the door, and it seemed that the horse was just outside. We waited for a moment. There was complete silence.

'It's gone, let's open the door and see,' I asked, taking the chain, which was holding the door closed, off the hook. I must have opened an inch or so when Somnath came and slammed the door back shut, before I could see anything. I was about to get my finger pinched between the doors, but instead of being sorry, he seemed to be upset with me.

'What?' It is gone,' I said.

'Why did you do that? Don't you understand, you will die if you see it' He spoke.

'It's g…' I was about to say that it was gone when we heard the *Ghungroo* sound again, right outside the door. Whatever it was, it was standing right outside the door, probably listening to us. As a reflex, I put the locking chain back on the hook. I was not scared of it as a Ghost. But I feared the actual horse, with its big head right next to my nose.

The room fell quiet. Lucky gently yanked me away from the door, as they were all afraid that I might open it again.

We returned to the bonfire after a few moments. The *Ghungaroo* sound resurfaced, and the horse seemed to be getting away. My folly of opening the door was discussed. They acted as if they had saved me from getting crushed under a moving bus. After about an hour, we were laughing about it as we prepared to go to bed.

When the doors were opened the next morning. Lucky and his family were taken aback. They discovered his uncle lying on the porch. The uncle was in poor health. Lucky and his father assisted his uncle by lifting him and bringing him inside the house.

After some time, it was discovered that the uncle had returned last night and being too drunk, he slept on the porch. That was not a big deal. The family, on the other hand, was concerned about something else. The uncle

had seen the mysterious mare the night before. He was staggering in the street towards his home when he heard the clinks of *Ghungroos*. He knew what it could be. He ran up to the porch of his house and tightly closed his eyes. The clinks came closer. He was tightly curled into a ball and kept his eyes closed, hiding his face between his knees. The mare was surely very near him. He could feel the warm putrid breath of the mare on him. He did not know for how long he stayed like that trembling with fear. He might have dozed off for some time, when he stood up, resting his back against the wall, keeping his eyes tightly shut.

There was no clink of *Ghungaroos*, all he could hear was his own breathing. Thinking that the mare had gone away, he slowly opened his eyes. Within a few inches in front of him was the mare's big head. It was black and shiny. The mare was standing on the street, with its head hanging over the porch right in front of his face. Lucky's uncle thought that his mind was playing tricks with him. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. It was still there. The head slowly moved to the side. Uncle saw that it had no eyes, just a shiny black head, and two large pointed ears. It was surely much bigger than the regular horses. Then the mare shook its large head, and *Ghungroos* clinked. The uncle again tightly shut his eyes, but this time he felt sharp pain in his head, like his head was going to burst. He lost consciousness, to be discovered by his family in the morning.

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'Lucky, see your uncle is still alive. His problem is the hangover. Give him some lemon water.' I told Lucky that evening.

'Sir, this has happened before, the people who see the mare do not survive for long.'

'Can you tell me when that happened last time?'

'Many years ago, when my father was my age. A man in our village saw the mare, and he died two days later. It had happened before that too, but that was the last known case.'

'That may have been a coincidence.' It was an interesting story, but I refused to entertain it any further. It was absurd.

Lucky knew that I did not believe in the story of the Mare. He did not say anything further. I spent my next day wandering around the village on my

own, as Lucky was busy with his family. I think he and his family needed some time to come out of last night's shock. The worry was written on their faces. I thought that they would be okay once they saw that nothing happens to the uncle.

As Lucky remained busy with his family. I spent the rest of the day capturing the natural beauty of the village with my phone camera. Everyone was friendly to me. A family invited me to join for lunch, even though they did not know me well. The village was indeed charming.

By the second morning, I was ready to leave the village. Lucky came to accompany me for the trek to the bus stop down. He still looked worried.

'Lucky, how is your uncle?'

'He is scared.'

'Tell him that he will be alright. He may be terrified by the stories everyone is telling him.'

'No Sir, even our Gram Devata told us last evening that the power of the curse is bigger than his, there is nothing we can do,' Lucky said. I sighed and left the discussion at this point.

We remain silent for most of the time while trekking down. I was thinking about this unusual occurrence. This was unbelievable, but one thing was certain: there were *Ghungroos* and horse tapping. I had heard it myself. There was something or someone who roamed in the village streets that night. It has got to be a prankster. If they would just let me open the door and look at it, I would have shown it to everyone and ended this bluff right there.

We arrived on the road with plenty of time before the bus was tp arrive. Lucky spoke after a brief pause.

'Sir, I will be unable to attend the office for another week. I will apply for a leave extension,' he said.

'OK, no worries, just take your time, I will manage' I said. I knew Lucky worked hard, and this was his first trip back to his village in over six months, so requesting a few more days was natural.

We parted on a solemn note. When I arrived in Delhi that evening, Lucky texted me, saying, 'My uncle has died.'

I was surprised. And when I called him, he did not appear surprised at all. His uncle came down with fever and bouts of vomiting. And he died on the way to the hospital. Lucky knew this was coming, which is why he had extended his leave. That day I learned that there exist things and powers we can never truly know and yet, we must somehow accept them.

DEVATA’S THEFT

(Based on a True Event)

‘Of course, he is powerful. There is no doubt about it,’ Anil said. He was sitting with his colleague Maniraj in their office cafeteria. Maniraj had recently joined Anil’s company as an office boy.

Maniraj was asking him about the *Gram-Devata*. Like many people who do not know about Devata, he seemed fascinated by their stories.

‘Sir, I am curious to know if everyone believes in the Gram-Devata, the predictions, and the dance. I had seen a video in which Devata's palanquin seemed to move on its own while merely resting on the shoulders of two men. The men were not even holding the palanquin by their hands, and still, it was bouncing,’ said Maniraj.

‘It is not a matter of belief. We do not just believe in Devata. We have personally witnessed it through our relatives, ancestors, and forefathers. It is the same like asking if we believe in our own parents. Devata has watched over us through ages.’ Anil said.

‘Witnessed? How?’

‘Devata knows everything about us. There are many stories’ Anil paused for a moment and spoke again, ‘Like once, we were searching for a suitable groom for my sister at one point. Devata told us a year ahead of time which village she would marry in. Within the year we had forgotten about the Devata’s words and were considering many options from different villages. But, my sister did, indeed, marry in the same village which was told by the Devata.’

‘This is amazing,’ Maniraj said, controlling his smile. He knew that Anil was passionate about Devata. Whenever Anil spoke about them, he spoke with such reverence and excitement. As per Maniraj, it was an elaborate drama by some cunning priests to swindle the innocent villagers.

Anil continued, ‘Devata will also let you know if there are any circumstances in which he is not involved. Once someone brought an ailing person there, and Devata told them it had nothing to do with Devata, or other spiritual energies and advised them to seek medical aid. So, it is not about money or fooling anyone.’

Maniraj nodded.

‘And it is not only such prophecies,’ Anil continued, ‘Devatas have emotions too, even anger. Once an old lady rudely asked Devata’s procession to take another route instead of the one through her apple orchard, stating that the people in procession can damage her trees. On the fourth day after that, she had a fatal fall from the stairs in her house,’

Maniraj suppressed a laugh. He did not believe Anil, but he managed to maintain a façade of curiosity. In his mind, he thought of all what Anil was telling as mere superstition, and naivety prevalent among illiterate villagers. The conversation was redirected to Gram-Devata and Devi. Anil described the gods' ability to dance when they are pleased. He told Maniraj that the movements of *Palki*, the Palanquin of Devatas are completely independent. The men holding the bamboo sticks are there to avoid its fall. They are just a medium for the Devata’s power.

‘Look carefully, the shoulders of these men… see the red, it is blood, bearing the weight of the Palki their shoulders are bruised.’ Anil said showing a video to Maniraj. Maniraj looked at it wide eyed.

‘You previously said that Gram-Devata *tells* people things. How does he do it, how can he talk? I mean, here in temples we worship idols, but they remain silent.’ Maniraj asked.

Anil replied with a knowing smile. He has seen this curiosity in people who heard about the devatas for the first time. He spoke, ‘The Devata communicates via a *gur*, a medium. A medium is a man chosen for the role who spends a year with the Devata in the temple and accompanies the Devata everywhere. He speaks on devata’s behalf.’

‘Who becomes the medium?’ Maniraj asked.

‘The Devata chooses one person from the village as a medium each year. The person stays with the Devata until a new medium is selected next year.’

‘Interesting, what does the devata look like… I mean his idol,’ Maniraj asked.

‘Here, I will show you’

Anil again took out his phone and presented some videos and pictures one by one to Maniraj. In one picture, the Devata’s palanquin and shining faces were showing.

‘See these faces, these are called *mohras*, these faces represent the main deity, I mean everyone prays to them?’ Maniraj said pointing to the picture.

‘Yes, and these faces represent the devata, they are made of pure Silver and Gold’

‘Sir, when you say gold, do you mean pure gold?’ Maniraj’s eyes widened in surprise, widest this time.

Anil nodded with a smile. He knew most people in cities do not know much about the Devatas. ‘Yes… in this one, our Village’s devata, the topmost face is made from pure gold, and the other four are made from silver; each must weigh at least four to five kilos. In case of some Devata’s the faces are made of bell-metal and brass as well. These faces symbolize purity, and devatas reside in them.’ Anil explained.

Maniraj’s eyes widened. This time he was genuinely awestruck. He enquired, ‘It must be heavily guarded in the Temple?’

Anil replied with a slight chuckle, ‘There is no need for security. Only the Medium or Priest is allowed to remain within the temple’s sanctum. The Devata is itself a guardian for the whole village. He watches and feels everything. No one will ever dare to enter the temple with malicious intentions,’ Anil added.

Maniraj was about to ask again, about how Devata can watch or feel, but he knew Anil will say something that will make him laugh. He focussed his thoughts back to the weight of gold and silver.

‘Sir, I wish I could see it for myself,’ Maniraj said.

‘I can show you right now on phone’

‘I want to see the Devata in person, I mean, I want to do the *darshan*

and get the blessings of Devata. Do they allow outsiders to be there?'

'Everyone is allowed. It is a temple of God, I am going to my village during the winter break next week. If you want to visit, you can come with me. You will be my guest and can stay at my place in the village. Wait till you see our village, it is a bit cold but very beautiful, especially at this time of the year.' Anil said.

'This means a lot to me. I feel honoured to be invited. Thank you so much, sir, I am eager to come,'

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Maniraj came to Anil's Village with Hasan, his friend. Anil and his family welcomed and greeted them warmly. Anil proudly shared the tales about the village's rich culture and history, especially the Gram-Devata and its magnificent Temple, while Maniraj and Hasan listened with excitement. They asked many questions about Devata.

'The temple structure is magnificent, one of its kind. It took more than three years to be completed. Over one crore rupees have been spent in those years. Must be valuing Twenty Crores now. They used the finest wood and hired the best craftsmen for finishing it.' Pride was palpable in Anil's voice when he talked about the temple to Maniraj

'Amazing, when can we see the Temple?' Maniraj inquired.

Anil smiled, ' I can understand your eagerness but you must be weary from the day's long journey,' He continued, 'Take some rest and we will go to the temple tomorrow morning,' he added.

'No sir, we are not tired. We are excited to visit the temple today, we want the Devata's divine blessings' Maniraj said, nodding to Hasan, who nodded in agreement.

'All right, if that's the case, freshen up and we will leave for the temple in half an hour. And then you will have the whole day today to see the village.' Anil said. Maniraj and Hasan nodded eagerly. Anil was pleased that they respected the culture of his village.

It took them about half an hour to walk to the temple. The temple was located at the highest point of the village, so the majority of the path was uphill. The temple compound had one small house in which the Priest and the

Medium stayed, and the other larger temple for Devata, with a Pagoda-styled architecture at one end and three diminishing wooden roofs above it. It was also linked to a large enclosed space. A hallway wall with carved wooden pillars encircled the temple structure. The temple had one main door and two additional doors on either side of the hall.

The two side doors had been locked. There was space for up to two hundred people inside the temple, and another two hundred could comfortably fit into the corridor and temple complex.

Anil was enthusiastically describing how everybody in the village including his family had contributed to the building of this temple. He also told them about the annual seven-day grand festival celebrated in the temple around Dussehra. While Maniraj was nodding and pretending to be interested in everything, he carefully noted the door, locks, the entry and exit points of the temple. The temple's boundary wall stood about eight feet tall and there was no broken glass or barbed wire on top to avoid any intruders. There was no security room. The temple's main door, which was open now, had an Aldrop-type lock with a brass lock hung on it. The two doors on the sides were closed, and their state indicated that they had not been opened in a long time.

The door opened into a large hall with storerooms on both sides and Devata's seat at the opposite end in front of them.

When Maniraj, Hasan, and Anil entered the temple hall, the priest noticed Anil and came near him. The other person kept sitting close to Devata’s seat, with his eyes closed and lips moving silently, whispering sacred chants in a hushed tone. Maniraj scanned the area carefully and noted that the side doors were blocked by big heavy-looking storage consoles on both sides.

The priest personally knew Anil. Everyone in the village knew each other. Anil introduced Maniraj and Hasan as his friends to the priest. The priest led them towards the Devata’s seat.

When they were about five meters away from the Devata’s idol, the other man, the medium, suddenly opened his eyes, stood up and rushed to them.

‘Stop.’ said the man sternly, showing his hand. There was a sense of

urgency in his voice. The group stopped immediately. This made Maniraj uneasy. He wondered if the Devata had true powers and had known his intention.

‘What happened?’ Anil said.

The other man who was sitting near the Devata came closer to the priest and said something in the local dialect.

The priest explained, ‘The Devata has said that these people cannot come close to him.’

‘Why?’ Anil asked. Maniraj felt his throat go dry with fear. The medium gestured for Anil to come aside and spoke to him in a whisper. Anil was nodding in understanding. The medium returned to his seat, and Anil came towards Maniraj.

Anil gestured for Maniraj to walk along with him outside the Temple. Once they were out of the temple. Anil spoke.

‘Did you guys have non-veg or alcohol recently? During the last two or three days?’

Maniraj was shocked, he was not a regular alcoholic, but he did have a few drinks the night before.

Maniraj thought for a moment and then spoke, ‘Yes, sir, there was a party last night, we all had it there,’

‘Sir, what is it all about? We had some drinks or maybe a little non-veg too recently, but why did they ask us to leave?’ Maniraj spoke. Anil shook his head in disappointment. He regretted bringing Maniraj and Hasan to the temple. But it was not their mistake if they did not know about the rules.

‘These rules apply to everyone, even to the villagers. Please do not mind them. Gram-Devata’s power gets affected when it is close to non-veg food, or someone who had non-veg food recently,’ Anil explained.

‘Oh, in that case, we are very sorry, we were not aware of that,’ Maniraj said, his mind working on his plan.

They walked back to the village. After spending some more time with Maniraj and Hasan, Anil left them in their room.

‘So, Hasan, all ready? It is a very simple job. One eight-foot wall and a regular padlock, which must be an easy job for you, a cakewalk,’ Maniraj spoke to his bulky friend.

Hasan responded, ‘Of course, there is no security. It is as good as lying on the floor for us to pick up. There seems to be some catch, it is never so easy’

‘Huh, there is no catch, it is just foolishness of these villagers. So, here is the plan. At nine, we will reach outside the temple complex. We will watch the action from a distance for a while, then enter once the Priest sleeps, we will do the job and leave before eleven. We should be out of the village by midnight, giving us at least five to six hours before they find out in the morning.’ Maniraj remarked.

‘What about the Devata’s powers?’ Hasan asked.

‘All nonsense, just a pile of bullshit,’ Maniraj said.

‘He was right about alcohol and non-veg food’ Hasan reminded him.

Maniraj stopped, yes that was true. It may have been a fluke by the Medium, as they did look like regular drinkers. But still, he did not want to take a chance.

He paused for a moment before speaking.

‘It is just a fluke. Most tourists enjoy drinks and non-veg food here, so it was safe to say that. For a moment let us assume that the Devata’s idol has some real power, and it was aware that we had recently consumed non-vegetarian food. With a devilish grin, he said, ‘But that also means we know Devata's weakness.’

Maniraj took Hasan with him to the Meat shop on the outskirts of the Village. They purchased a huge quantity of meat and kept it in a backpack. By the time they came back to the village, darkness had fallen, with only faint yellow lights emanating from a few windows. The darkness brought with itself a bitter cold, forcing the villagers to stay inside their homes.

Maniraj walked as slowly as possible when they had to pass near a village house. There was no usual city sound of traffic to mask the sound of their footsteps.

Villagers were cautious of the sounds, fearing that it might be a mountain tiger or other animal on the prowl for their cattle or other household pets, and most of them carried hunting rifles. In such a scenario, a misunderstanding could easily result in the death of Maniraj and Hasan.

It was chilly, but Maniraj and Hasan were well-protected by their thick jackets and warmers. The weather changed, and the wind became stronger, freezing them to the bone. It was difficult for Maniraj and Hasan, but it helped them stay undetected. Everyone in the village had shut their windows and doors because of the strong wind. The sound of the wind masked any noise made by Maniraj and Hasan. It was a fortunate turn of events for them.

Once they were at a distance from the main cluster of the houses in the village, they picked up the pace. Maniraj pulled his sleeve up, only enough to check the watch. It was about to be Nine, when they arrived outside the temple compound.

To get a better view of the temple compound, they climbed a short distance up a hillock at a distance. Seven mast lights were mounted around the main Devata's Temple for lighting. The light was also coming from the windows of the smaller building that housed the priest and the medium.

The wind died down for some time. The evening *aartis* have been completed already. It was only the priest and medium in the Temple. They were preparing to close the temple for the night. The priest pulled a curtain on the Devata’s faces, then started picking the cushions on the floor, and keeping them in one corner of the temple hall. One by one the lights in the main temple hall were turned off. Maniraj and Hasan patiently waited, rubbing their hands to keep warm. It took the men in the temple about half an hour to pack the things, turn off all the lights, and shut the side doors. The two men in the temple emerged from the main door and the priest locked the main door. Then both men went to their small building for the night.

The lights in the smaller building were also switched off after a few minutes. But there were still tall mast lights illuminating the whole of the temple compound.

Hasan asked Maniraj, ‘Shall we enter?’

‘No, we will wait for fifteen more minutes, to make sure these two

fools are properly asleep.'

It was only a matter of time. After fifteen minutes, they came closer to the temple wall. They waited another ten minutes to be sure. There was no one around but the mast lights were still on. They could be easily seen from a distance. Maniraj hesitated for a few moments. Then he looked around. There was no one in sight. The cold was so bitter that their fingers, inside thick gloves, were hurting. *No one would dare to be out in this weather*. He thought.

Then Maniraj decided to move ahead with the plan. He opened the pack of meat and tossed some pieces into the temple compound. As if some magic had happened, the brisk breeze became more intense. They heard the sound of an electric spark somewhere inside the temple compound, and suddenly even the mast lights were off. It was pitch dark now.

Maniraj put his hand strongly on his mouth to suppress the laughter. He whispered to Hasan, 'Looks like our Meat's power is more than Devata's power. Hurry up, the wind will drown any noise we make, and no one will be able to chase us in this darkness,' Maniraj turned his phone's flashlight on. Hasan took a few steps back from the wall and then leapt at it like a high jumper. He hung from the top of the wall for a second, and in another swift movement, he was on top of the wall.

Maniraj handed Hasan his phone with the flashlight on, and then followed him into the temple compound. Even with the flashlight it was too dark, but Maniraj had memorised the temple's layout so well that he was walking confidently as if it was a bright day. Hasan just had to follow the tiny flashlight of Maniraj's phone moving ahead of him. Maniraj carried the bag of meat in one hand. They entered the temple corridor from the side and walked to the main gate. Maniraj kept throwing pieces of meat. He was convinced that the meat pieces were working for him.

The Temple's main door was locked with the same padlock that Maniraj and Hasan had seen hanging earlier in the day. Hasan took two spanners from his pocket and pried open the padlock as if it were made of plastic by using them as a lever against each other. They walked straight to the place where Devata's idol was kept.

Maniraj took a deep breath. He looked at the Devata and thought about the stories of Devata's power. For a tiny moment, he felt a bit of fear

and thought of leaving, but the glimmering gold made him move ahead. The face glimmered in the dim light of the phone's flashlight. It had an expression of indifference and peace, neither smiling nor frowning. *It is beautiful and peaceful and will remain peaceful in my bag too,* Maniraj thought. He took out a knife from his jacket and started scraping it at the edges to separate it from its wooden base. To his surprise, it was fixed very solidly. Maniraj tried with a solid screwdriver. But it did not budge. Maniraj was strongly built and muscular person, and yet he could not scrape out the golden mask. Then Maniraj tried scraping out the silver ones, and Hasan tried for the golden one. After about five minutes, despite the cold both of them were perspiring.

Maniraj thought about carrying the complete wooden plank, but it was too big and heavy to carry. Even if they somehow managed to carry it out, anyone would easily recognise from a mile's distance, it in the whole of the state. The other option was to cut the wood, but they did not have proper cutting tools for the same. Even if they had the cutters, it would be impossible to do so without creating a racket.

The elation Maniraj felt earlier was totally gone now. He was so near and yet could not do anything. He had not expected failure in such a way.

'Let us move out, we will come again with more tools' Maniraj said. Hasan agreed.

As they packed and turned to leave. They heard a clink. One of the silver faces has fallen on the ground itself. Maniraj smiled and picked it up. He decided to give another try to other faces.

To his surprise, the faces came off easily this time.

'Ha-ha, all it needed was a few gentle hits of this screwdriver' Maniraj said to himself. Maniraj held the pure golden face in his hands. It was the first time Maniraj was holding anything this valuable. The face slipped from his grasp but fell straight into Maniraj's bag which was directly below it as if it wished to be there. Maniraj grinned at his luck. Within fifteen minutes he had completed the task.

Maniraj and Hasan were too happy when they jumped out of the temple. This was the easiest job they had ever done and with maximum reward.

'It is not my fault that these silly *Pahari* people keep so much Gold

without any security,’

‘Thank you, Mani Bhai, for keeping me with you. I needed this one.’ Hasan replied. Half of the loot had been promised to him. He planned to quit his job in the city and go back to his village and enjoy the bounty. He had no idea that, in his mind, Maniraj was deciding between nothing and one silver for him.

Maniraj chuckled, there was no hurry to bring up the topic of division as of now. The bag was heavy, but he was happy to carry it himself.

‘Now what? Mani Bhai,’ Hasan asked.

‘We'll have to walk down to the farthest village,’ Maniraj replied.

‘That is a long way. It will take us the whole night.’

‘Yes, but we must. We will have a lot of time to rest once we cross the state border. If we keep walking all night, they will not be able to find us even in any nearby villages in the morning. And by the time the word gets to the nearby villages, we will be halfway to the city on the bus.’

Hasan smiled and nodded. He admired Maniraj’s artifice.

Maniraj became exhausted after about two hours of walking. He felt strange because he was well built and had remained active for longer periods in the past. The bag weighed a little more than twenty kilogrammes, even though it was gold and silver.

‘You seem tired,’ Hasan said.

‘I am alright,’ Maniraj said, catching his breath.

‘I can carry the bag for some time,’

Maniraj would not have let Hasan touch the bag, but his exhaustion was increasing with each step. Reluctantly, he decided to divide it. He put the silver faces in Hasan's bag and kept the gold one with himself. That way he had the lightest but most valuable load. Hasan wanted to carry the gold one too, but he did not want to upset Maniraj, and agreed to carry the silver faces. He was pleased with the jingle of precious metal in his bag, and Maniraj was pleased with the weight reduction for the time being.

They continued walking through the quiet, sleeping villages. The wind had calmed down considerably. They had been on their feet for hours

and were growing exhausted with each step. Yet they remained adamant and continued to drag themselves.

They were tired as they walked, and their bags seemed to grow heavier with each step. They looked as if they were going to buckle under the weight of it. Maniraj threw out everything except the faces. Surprisingly, just as they were about to stop with exhaustion, they started to feel better, the bags became lighter, and they continued to move.

They arrived at the bus stop on the main road outside the farthest village as planned. While it was still dark, the sky on the horizon had begun to change colours. Their legs were aching with all the walk. But they were happy that very soon they will be safely away. Nearby, a man was setting up a small tea stall. Maniraj approached the man.

‘When will the first bus to the city arrive, Brother?’

The guy responded, ‘In about an hour.’

‘An hour?’ Maniraj was not happy with the news. He wanted to leave as soon as possible.

‘Yes.’ The guy said and returned to set up his shop.

Hasan placed their bag near the tea stall and ordered two cups of tea and some *Khari* to eat. Maniraj kept his bag on his shoulders. Despite the weight, he did not want to part with the bag even for a minute. They sat on a boulder conveniently situated near the tea shop. He let the bag rest on the ground, but kept the carrying strap entangled in his hand. He never let the bag go out of sight or touch. After half an hour, there were more people. Maniraj carefully looked at each one. He was scared that someone might have come there looking for them. But none of them seemed to be looking for anyone. They were busy among themselves.

By this time the priest must have found out about the missing Devata faces. They may take some more time to find them missing from Anil’s house. Maniraj took a sigh of relief when the bus came into sight. Both stood up and stretched.

‘I will sleep immediately on the bus,’ Hasan said.

‘But take care of the bag,’ Maniraj cautioned.

‘Of course, I'll keep the bag on my lap at all times,’ Hasan assured, bending down to grab his bag. As he tried to lift the bag, the bag did not move. When he pulled hard with his full body weight, the top handle wore off and he fell backwards. Hasan looked around, the people waiting for the bus noticed him falling. He got up and smiled to show he was okay.

He tried again. Pulling the bag with both hands. The bag seemed to have stuck. It did not budge even an inch. Maniraj gave him a wide-eyed stare. Maniraj got up, carrying his bag with the Golden face with him and pulled Hasan back and attempted to lift Hasan's bag. The result was the same. Then he kept his own bag with just one face on the ground and tried to lift Hansan’s bag using both his hands. The bag did not budge.

After failing several times, Maniraj tried to lift his bag. To his shock and surprise, he could not lift this bag either. Hasan tried to lift Maniraj’s bag, but no result. The bags seem to be stuck to the ground.

They had lifted the bags and walked for miles, and now they were not able to move the same bags even an inch. Maniraj again tried to lift his bag. Unsuccessful, Maniraj asked Hasan to leave his bag and help him lift this one. Both together tried to pull the bag but the bag did not move at all.

By this time the people around had noticed them struggling with their bags. The bus conductor walked up to them.

‘It is time for the bus to leave, are you coming?’ The conductor inquired. Only the people who wanted to catch this bus came to the bus stop at this time. There was no reason for the people to stand there otherwise. The next bus was after another three hours.

‘Um, yes we have to come, but...,’ Hasan said.

‘Is it too heavy? Do you want some help?’ the bus conductor said and gestured to a few boys standing nearby to come.

Before Maniraj or Hasan could say anything, the boys tried lifting the bags. They laughed at each other for being weak, as they also could not move the bags. When the best of them, and the most muscular one tried and failed, their curiosity increased, and finally, they opened the bags and found the Devata’s faces.

As soon as they discovered the Devata's faces, the bags became light.

The villagers could easily pick them up. There was a collective gasp, followed by the angry cries of the villagers.

Before Maniraj and Hasan could even consider escaping, they were surrounded by the enraged crowd. Some of them had brought bamboo sticks. By the time Maniraj and Hasan were handed over to the police, they were not able to stand up on their own. And the Devata’s faces were smiling in the temple.

LAND OF FAIRIES

‘I need a break.’ I said letting out a big sigh. This work-from-home had become so monotonous. I wanted to move out, travel, see the world, and now I do not even see my own office or colleagues (other than on my laptop’s screen).

‘Manav, you *are* on a break. You have been at home for more than three months now. What else do you need?’ My mother said.

‘It is *not* a break. I am *working* from home, bound to this boring routine. There are no surprises, no excitement. I feel trapped and suffocated. Worse, everyone thinks I am free and come to our home unexpectedly, knowing that I will be here. And they waste my time, and then I complete my work at night, burning the candle on both sides. I want a break from this’

‘Do you want to start working from the office?’

I thought about it and a shiver ran down my spine thinking about getting up on time, wading through the traffic and facing everyone in the office, *daily*.

My mother saw the terror on my face and smiled. Sometimes, she reads my mind perfectly. She spoke again, ‘When this started, you were jumping with joy, what happened now?’

She was right, I was ecstatic when the Work-from-home began. It completely changed my lifestyle. I did not need to get up, get ready, change into my office clothes, and then rush to the office. I could work in my pyjamas. No one bothered if they took a shower in the morning, or afternoon. I could work lying on a bed. Saving on my commute time, I tried new things, learned to cook many dishes, painted my room, read many books. It was fun at the beginning, but then the excitement settled down and it was the same day over and over. There was nothing new. Still, I did not want to go to the office regularly.

‘Yes, I was happy then, but now I am not. I do not know what to do. I do not even want to go to the office. In any case, they are also not opening any time soon.’ I said, sulking.

‘You are an adult. You need to solve your problems yourself. But you are welcome to ask me for any advice or suggestion,’ Mom said.

She had always been like that, never imposing her will upon me, and encouraged me to make my own decisions… and even mistakes. She would never directly ask me to do things, she would give me hints and suggestions and encourage me to see things clearly and then make the right decision. For direct advice, I needed to ask for it. Sometimes it felt frustrating, but overall, I knew she had given me the independence most Indian kids never get. Even though I have been an adult for more than ten years now. Still, I look up to her for advice.

‘All right, I am not able to figure out what to do… what do you suggest I should do?’

She thoght for a moment and spoke, ‘I think that you need a change of place for some time. A change of the atmosphere,’

Like always my mother has said what I should have figured out myself, or I just wanted to hear it from her. I surely needed a change of place. But with the work-from-home system, where else can I be? That is when I decided to call Preeti, my friend who was also in the same set of circumstances.

‘So, what do you think about it? How long will this work from home continue?’

‘Well, as per the news, the IT sector has benefited a lot with the work from home system, and they are never going to revert to the old full office system, at least, never to the same pre-pandemic levels.’

‘So, we are stuck at home for at least a long time?’ I enquired.

‘It appears so’

‘Initially it was convenient to work from home, but now I have had enough of it, it has become monotonous. Mom says, I need a change of atmosphere, and I agree. But, how can I do it?’

‘Change of atmosphere… That is not a bad idea. See, this work from home is going to continue for at least three months. Why don’t you go for a vacation?’

‘It is work-from-home, not a paid holiday,’ I said with a sad chuckle.

‘I know, but you can have your home anywhere. Who asked you to stay within Delhi?’

‘Where can I go? You know we need a reliable high speed internet connection. See, I had given it a thought. Let us say, I go somewhere and check into a hotel. I could work online from there. Maybe I will do it for a couple of days or a week at max. What after that? There will not be a change of atmosphere in a week. And if I stay longer I will be literally paying my salary to the hotel, this is not a viable option.’ I said.

‘You are right,’ Preeti said and went silent for a moment, thinking about my problem.

‘Hello, are you there?’ I checked if we were still connected.

‘Ah, yes, yes, I am here. How do you feel about visiting the mountains, the Himalayas?’ She asked.

‘Of course, mountains will be a lovely change, a real change of atmosphere. But the hotels there may be even costlier. How long can I afford to be there?’

‘See, I have a friend who owns a very nice homestay in Uttarakhand. Due to the current pandemic situation, there are no tourists. I think he can offer something very reasonable for a long stay.

‘Uttarakhand, sounds nice,’ I said. I had heard that Uttarakhand has the most naturally beautiful hill stations. I was excited.

Things worked out and I decided to spend a month in the lovely homestay. While we discussed the possible excitement in this way of work, Preeti also made up her mind and decided to try it. After a short flight from Delhi followed by a four-hour car ride, we arrived in Karkheri, a small village in Uttarakhand's Tehri Garhwal district. It was a small village with a population of no more than a thousand, or perhaps fewer people.

The home stay was at the outskirts of the village, at the edge of a

mountain overlooking a valley. It had only five rooms, and we were given the two best rooms with the view of the valley. The other rooms were empty. The caretaker lived in a smaller house next to the homestay. His son was a friend of Preeti, so we were both paying guests as well as friends for them.

Since we planned to stay here for at least a month, we took some time in setting up our rooms as per our preference. I placed my work table next to the window which overlooked the valley below, and snow-capped mountains ahead. The mountain was lush green, with lots of trees and the small patches where there were no trees there was grass. The sky was overcast, but there was no fog that day. The valley appeared pristine and fresh. A picture taken from that window would be a fit for a beautiful wallpaper for any phone or laptop without any edits. That evening, I took a picture of a steaming cup of tea on the window sill and sent it to my mother. This cup of tea with the beautiful valley in the background perfectly portrayed my state of bliss.

On our request, the home-stay owner had already arranged for a high-speed internet connection and we were able to set up our office in minutes and we were good to go. The joy came back to work. The serenity offered by the place was impossible, even unimaginable in a city like Delhi. Our small breaks from work were breaks from home as well. They were like tiny vacations on a beautiful hill station. Maybe after a while someone could get used to the lovely window view, but it kept surprising us by changing throughout the day, with the play of shadows, and then again changing with the change of weather. Every day it looked afresh. Sometimes the valley was completely covered in mist, and all we could see from the window was milky whiteness. Many times, we could see the clouds down in the valley while we enjoyed the sunshine. Sometimes we had to close the window to keep the clouds from entering the room. If I had to describe this place in one word, I would say ‘Magical’. We made the most out of it. Preeti felt likewise. One morning after a few days, I saw her practicing Yoga asanas.

‘I never knew you were into such things,’

‘You mean Yoga?’ She asked

‘Yes and that meditation thing too,’

‘There is something about this place, the calm, which inspires me positively to do something better to be a better version of myself.’

I agreed with her. There was positivity in this place. Perhaps that is why in many old tales, people came to the mountains to perform meditations or penances. Even I began working on my long pending draft of stories, and finally completed many of them more than a year's gap.

As the Work-from-home concept was continuing, we extended our stay by another month, and then after one month. After the third month, we told the owners that we were going to stay till we have the work-from-home system going on. During this time, whenever we had time, we walked around in the village. Every corner of the village had something to offer, be it beautiful views, intriguing stories or sacred temples. We visited one temple of Narsing Devata. Most of the villagers knew us as the guests from Delhi. We often chatted with them. We were offered hot tea and local cuisine. The primary food was rice, but it was prepared differently, and the curries were flavourful. Most of the times we had the food arranged by home-stay owners, at other times the neighbours sent the food, mostly when they cooked something special. And sometimes, we also cooked ourselves on an induction cook top with us at the home-stay.

The hills are different when you come here only for sightseeing for only a few days, and very different when you stay longer. When we visit as tourists, we keep moving from one place to another with a sense of urgency, trying to cover maximum places, making the most of your trip, while missing to observe many things. Although most people do not have the time like we did. But staying for longer changes the way we perceive hills. At first, they appeared like perfect sceneries for a phone wallpaper, but they are more than just that. We realised that these hills have stories to tell. The Village Karkheri has the character of someone who is very shy at first, but gradually opens up to you, and then it is like a caring and best friend. It tells you interesting stories, whenever you have time to listen.

One lazy Sunday, while we were sitting in the balcony, enjoying the sunlight after a couple of days of rain, Ashu, who had a small shop near the homestay, was sitting with us. Ashu was our saviour in the emergencies when we required noodles or AA Batteries. Also, he had interesting stories to tell us. We welcomed him to join us for tea and snacks.

'Ashu Bhaiya how are you?' Preeti asked him.

'I am good ji, my brother's marriage is fixed for next month. You

must come,’

We were not surprised at the invitation from him. We had become part of the village, and in a marriage, the whole village was invited to the celebration by default.

‘Sure, we will, if we are here by then. What about you Ashu? When are you getting married?’ Preeti asked him. Ashu was a young boy, possibly seventeen or eighteen. Preeti knew it was too early for him to marry, but she was just teasing him. Ashu gave a shy smile.

‘You are pulling my leg. I know I still have time before I tie the knot,’ he said.

‘Tell us, do not be shy. Have you found a girl for yourself?’ I asked. Ashu giggled.

‘No, I am still looking for one’

'There are so many beautiful girls here,' Preeti said.

'But I have not found the one for myself,'

‘Oh, do you want a *Pari* for yourself, a Fairy?’ I asked him.

‘Oh, what are you saying, Pari’s are dangerous creatures, they can kidnap you,’

‘Now you are pulling our legs,’ Preeti said laughing.

‘No, it is true and the *Pari*s do exist not far from here’ he said. He looked serious about it.

‘Oh, tell us where they are? Can we see them?’ I asked.

‘Not everyone can see them, but they exist. Many people have seen them.’

‘Where? How far from here?’ I asked

‘Khait Parvat, you may have heard about it. It is also called the mountain of fairies. You can check on google’

‘We have not heard about it. How is it spelled?’ I said, opening the search engine application on my phone.

‘Khait… K H A I T Parvat’

‘Got it.’

‘It is a divine place. You will love it, if you are able to see it.’ Ashu said. He looked excited.

‘Oh yes, it is there and wow it is actually mentioned as the land of fairies on a signboard. See,’ I presented my phone to Preeti. There was a picture of a signboard with ‘Famous Khait Mountain (land of Fairies) only five kilometres by foot’ displayed on it.

‘How far is it from here?’ Preeti asked Ashu.

‘A two-hour drive from here, and about a five-kilometre hike, a difficult trek. It may take three or four hours, but it is a beautiful trek.’

‘This is interesting, what about the fairies, you were calling it the mountain of fairies. Right?’

‘Yes ma’am, it is the mountain of fairies, there is a temple where fairies are worshipped.’

‘A temple of fairies? Is it for real?’ I asked

‘Yes, Nine fairies. It is said that they live on Khait Mountain in their invisible form. But some people have seen them. And there are stories that they kidnap people,’ Ashu said. I looked at Preeti, she was also amused.

‘You may or may not find a Pari there, they are not visible to everyone. But you will feel like being at the top of the world there, the views are beautiful. You can also see the Kedarnath range from there. It is something one must do at least once in their lifetime. Now you have come so near, you can plan a visit,’

Next Saturday, the sky was clear and we had a free weekend. We packed our bags, and left for Musankiri, the village Ashu had told us about. The drive was only about fifty kilometres but it took us two hours, as it was winding throughout and mostly uphill. The traffic was sparse, I noticed only two or three cars and a solitary public bus appeared on the route. There were few villages in between, but I could not see any person. When I asked the driver about them, he said that they were ghost villages, which meant that no one lived there anymore. I found it strange that someone worked so hard to build those houses, only to abandon them. The driver told us that there were many such ghost villages in the state. Most of the residents relocated to the

cities in search of work.

Musankiri was a tiny village, even smaller than Kharkeri. The driver told us that it had a population of less than 100 persons. We stopped for tea and samosas at a small roadside shop in Musankiri. The tea vendor knew that we were heading for Khait Mountain, as many tourists who stopped at his stall did. The route did not lead to anything more popular.

'There are two temples up there. One is of Ragaz Devata, and the other one of the devis. Do not miss to pray at Ragaz Devata, as he is the guardian for us. He protects us from evil powers,' he told us.

We began our trek. At the start of the trek, it was a narrow path strewn with stones. It did not look very picturesque, but as we progressed it kept on offering beautiful views. The track changed from stony to a dried grass one. Some passages were through dense forest. There were broken cemented stairs too at many places.

As we started the weather took a turn, and the sun was hidden behind the clouds. That made the trek even lovelier. I understood why Ashu had said that it was a difficult trek. It was only five kilometres, but almost entirely uphill. There were no flat surfaces, and the climb was mostly circuitous. At times we walked at the edge of the mountain, and at times we passed through the trees. I was mostly breathless, but Preeti was in much better shape because of her regular yoga practices. I took many stops to catch my breath, while Preeti clicked the pictures of the jungle and valleys. At many locations we could see the Bhilangana River.

The tea vendor had told us that a group of boys had started the trek about an hour earlier than us. But we did not catch them on the trek. The boys were perhaps younger and faster than us. Also no one else passed us, which meant we were trekking alone for those five hours.

On the way, we saw a small one room temple of Ragaz Devata. Even without knowing the exact story about the devata, we bowed to the divine power, rested there for a while before continuing our trek. For me that was one of the most difficult treks I had ever done. It was like climbing a steep staircase in an oxygen deficit two hundred floor building.

After about five hours since we had started from Musankiri, we had reached the Khait Mountain Temple. There were two smaller temples before

the main temple. The cement stairs were covered with overgrown dried grass, very much in need for repair. So were the small temples. Once we passed through the main gate, it was a breath-taking view. We were at the peak, the main temple was in front of us, and there was only blue sky in the background. The wind was blowing hard. The temple flag, and tied strings of cloth were flapping in the wind. The temple was built in a pagoda style with straight roofs, with three levels and a pyramid shaped centre dome. In the temple courtyard, there was a large idol of lord Shiva in a meditating pose, with a majestic trident standing next to it. The scenery was surreal. There was an air of other-worldliness about the temple, the absence of crowd made it even more enchanting.

There was a shed on one side of the temple, from where we could enjoy the view of the vast expanse of mountains. It was surreal, we could feel like we were at the top of the world. Later, I came to know that we were ten thousand and five hundred feet above the sea-level. When we came out of the temple, we saw four boys sitting under the shed enjoying the view. That was the ideal place to relax before starting our trek back to Musankiri.

Since we were the only other tourists, the boys waved a hello to us. We reciprocated. One of the boys was adding water in a pan kept at a corner. When I asked, they told us that they had a portable burner and were going to make some tea and Instant noodles. The idea of hot tea and Noodles at this place was amazing. Just when I was thinking why such an idea had not occurred to us, the boys offered us tea and noodles. It was impossible to refuse this treat. In return, we shared some packets of chips we were carrying in our backpacks. We introduced ourselves. The one who offered us the Maggi was Aman, the one cooking it was Lokesh, the one clicking pictures was Rohit, and the one posing for pictures was Bhupinder.

We learned over cups of hot tea and noodles that they were students at a college in Dehradun and had planned to visit Khait during a long weekend.

‘So, Aman, why did you choose to visit Khait?’ Preeti asked them.

Aman was the one who made tea for everyone and was the chattiest. The others, Rohit, Lokesh, and Bhupinder, appeared shy.

‘For one thing, it provides the most beautiful views of Garhwal, and for another, we had heard many stories and were curious about them,’ Aman explained.

‘What kind of stories?’ I asked. I knew they would talk about fairies, just like Ashu.

‘This is a land of fairies,’

‘Really?’

‘It is written on government signboards. There was one down in Musankiri as well,’

‘Oh yes, I had seen that. They did mention ‘Khait Parvat, Pariyon ka Desh (Khait Mountain, Country of Fairies),’ I said. I had seen it when Ashu had told us about Khait.

‘Do you believe in fairies,’ Preeti inquired. Her eyes were full of surprise.

‘Not really. But we were still curious to come here, it is a a nice trek and the best place to have noodles and tea.’

‘Has anyone ever seen any fairy around here?’ I asked them.

‘Oh, there are many people who claim to have seen them,’ he said.

‘Any solid proof, any video or picture of fairies?’ I asked.

‘No, there is no proof,’ Aman replied. Bhupinder who was attentively listening to our conversation came closer and spoke.

‘There is a folk tale about a man named Jeetu Bagadwal, who was kidnapped by these fairies. He along with his bulls simply vanished. This happened in the ninth century. The fairies were attracted to him because he played the flute beautifully. This is the reason that playing any musical instrument is not allowed on Khait,’

‘This all nonsense,’ the third boy Lokesh said. Preeti and I looked at each other and smiled. There is always at least one logical person in a group. We did not believe these stories either, but we enjoyed hearing them.

‘That happened in the ninth century, and the better story is that the king Manshaw had him killed, because he became involved with the ladies of the king’s family,’ Lokesh said.

I chuckled.

‘That sounds plausible,’ Preeti said.

It was late afternoon, but there was no sun. The clouds darkened quickly, and we heard a distant thunder. It was an incredible view, where we could see clouds above us as well as below us down in the valley. It was the kind of heaven depicted in some epic TV shows, where it seems like you are hanging somewhere in the sky and there are clouds all around you.

'We should get moving. If it rains, it will be difficult to climb down,' I said. Although I wanted some more rest, I could not risk trekking in the rain. It will be almost impossible to trek back on a wet path.

The boys also got up and rushed out. They were faster than us, but they stopped at places in between and then we caught up to them. We were in a cocoon of clouds, and could see only our trek with white mist all around. We heard some loud screams coming from a distance. We knew it was those boys speaking loudly. I thought that they were screaming for the echo effect.

It was getting darker, but thankfully the wind was relaxed now. But it also meant it could rain anytime. When we reached the Ragaz temple, we saw Bhupinder, Rohit and Aman standing outside the temple. They did not appear to be in the same jolly mood as before. I had not expected them to tire so quickly. When we reached closer, they looked up to us, like they were waiting for us.

'What happened? Tired?' I asked Aman.

He tried to say something, but no voice came out of him. That is when I noticed that his eyes were teary.

Bhupinder pointed to the edge of little flat land behind the temple.

'He was standing there when he fell,' Bhupinder spoke. It took me a moment to understand who Bhupinder was referring to. The only one who was missing at the location was Lokesh. I thought he might have walked faster and reached ahead of all.

'What?' I said, I needed to confirm what I had just heard. That is when Rohit spoke.

'Lokesh, he was just having some fun with the echo effect. He was saying some funny words loudly towards the valley. Then he asked for some pictures over there, near the edge, covering the mist in the background. It was a silly, stupid idea.' Rohit said, shaking his head.

He paused before continuing.

‘I told him not to move too far back. I assumed he was keeping a safe distance. But then he stumbled backward. As you can see, I have a picture.’

We looked at Rohit’s phone. There were photos of Lokesh posing happily amid the cloud of mist. Photographs appeared magical. With feet cropped out of picture, he looked like he was floating in the clouds. Then in the last picture, Lokesh had a terrified expression. It was just before he fell.

I called his name loudly. Amit and Bhupinder also called him, but we did not get any response. Lokesh did not reply. He did not even scream or anything when he fell.

Now, I knew the reason for the loud noise we had heard earlier, it was Amit and Bhupinder calling Lokesh’s name. I went to the location behind the temple. The mist was so thick now that it was difficult to walk. I moved forward slowly.

‘Be careful, Manav,’ Preeti warned.

The mist had become even thicker. I could only see about a couple of feet ahead of me. Uncertain of the ground beneath me, I sat down on my hands and feet and inched forward carefully. I was curious about the depth of the trench. And hoped that if we saw Lokesh hanging somewhere, we would be able to save him. But, to my surprise, I covered about six or seven feet and still there was no edge. The mist was thicker, probably I was in a cloud now. I felt blind in this place. But the land was still there. I looked back. I could see the faint outline of Preeti. Standing a few feet behind me. I realised that even if I made it to the edge, I would not be able to see anything.

‘How is it possible?’ I said.

‘What?’ Preeti asked.

‘As per the photographs, Lokesh did not seem to be standing that far away. In fact, I have gone even further,’

Preeti looked at me, expecting me to say more.

‘I mean how can he fall from that distance. He was at a good distance away from the edge. How can he fall like this?’

Preeti looked at the temple and estimated the distance. As per the

photographs, Lokesh seemed to be at a good distance from the edge.

‘You have a point,’ she said, and walked towards Rohit.

‘Could you please show the pictures again?’ She asked Rohit

Rohit opened the Photo Gallery of his phone and handed the phone to Preeti. Preeti scrolled through the pictures again. Looking intently. Rohit and I were also looking at the phone over her shoulders. She looked at the pictures several times and then looked at the location. One thing was sure that Lokesh was well within the edge.

‘You see that, he was not standing beyond that point,’ Preeti said pointing to the location.

‘Yes’ Rohit said while slowly nodding.

‘He cannot be beyond that point,’ He spoke again.

‘And there is at least six feet of flat land beyond that point,’ I said.

‘Then how did Lokesh...,’ Now Bhupinder spoke up. He went to that point, and slowly moved ahead like I had done.

‘Yes, there is more than six feet beyond this point. Lokesh was not standing near the edge. It is slightly inclined, but he cannot fall from here. Moreover, there is dry grass here, he cannot even slip,’ Bhupinder spoke as if he was asking himself.

‘Perhaps he fell and rolled over. I know, it seems highly unlikely, but that seems like the only plausible explanation,’ Aman said.

It was not a convincing explanation, but no one said anything about it.

The sky was getting darker. We needed to get moving. *But what about Lokesh?* His friends were not ready to move. They were too stunned by what had happened. We just sat at the door of Ragaz Temple.

I looked at the deity’s idol. It looked like demon or Rakshash. There was a huge sword in his hand. I went near the gate and bowed down to him. At that time, I had only the safety of Lokesh in my mind. Here, we were only a few people on the entire trek. Strangely even after being together for just a couple of hours, I felt like I knew these guys, including Lokesh personally. I was feeling like I had lost someone close to me. At that moment I was just as upset as Rohit, Bhupinder, or Aman. The sky was dark, all the sounds we

heard were natural, mainly the distant rumble of clouds, and some chirping of birds. The mist kept moving, sometimes it was so dense that we could not see beyond a few feet, and sometimes we could see the valley through it. I did not know anything about Ragaz Devata, but I felt like praying to him, wishing that somehow Lokesh comes back.

I had lost track of time when I was standing in front of the temple. But when I turned around, Rohit, Bhupinder and Aman were standing beside me praying to the deity.

Preeti was sitting at the stone slab in front of the temple, looking at the pictures in Rohit's phone. She was also shocked with the happening, and pictures made it feel like we could have saved Lokesh somehow. I went near Preeti. She had zoomed in on the last picture in which Lokesh had lost his balance. I noticed Preeti was looking intently at Lokesh's shoulders.

'What are you looking for?' I asked Preeti. She was startled a bit. Perhaps she did not notice that I was standing next to her.

'Manav, look here. This is a bit strange,' she said, moving the phone towards me.

I looked at the picture of Lokesh, zoomed in around his shoulders. It looked a bit pixelated, sure there were some fingers like patterns on his shoulders. Due to the mist, the contrast was poor, but there was something there. Lokesh's jacket was light brown in colour. But the pattern around his shoulder was much lighter. As far as I recalled, it was a totally plain jacket, with no such design.

'Aman!' I called. He came to me. I showed him the photograph.

'Was there such a design or patterns like this on Lokesh's jacket?' I asked. He took the phone from me, and looked at the picture. He zoomed out and zoomed in several times. Then he closed his eyes trying to recall the jacket design. He scrolled back and checked the earlier pictures which were taken closely, and in better light. There was no such design on the jacket. He showed the picture and handed the phone back to me.

'What does this mean?' He spoke.

'It means, there was someone behind Lokesh.' Preeti said.

Aman called Rohit, and showed him the pictures.

‘But there was nobody behind him,’ Rohit said.

‘I remember, you and Bhupinder sitting there, while I was clicking Lokesh’s pictures,’ He continued.

‘And there is no one else besides us on this trek,’

Bhupinder also came closer. Rohit showed him the phone.

‘Did someone push him?’ Bhupinder asked.

‘These patterns look like someone’s fingers. He may have been pushed,’ Aman said.

Everyone looked at each other.

‘Show me the photo again,’ I asked. Now, the pattern did look like fingers. I tried to see any faint image of someone standing behind Lokesh. But the mist was so dense that there was nothing other than the fingers. I wondered why someone would push Lokesh like this, with both hands on his shoulders.

‘It does not look like he was pushed,’ I said.

Preeti looked at me.

‘See, if someone had to push him, he does not need to hold him by both shoulders. Moreover a push from back will only make him fall forward’

‘That does seem logical. Why would someone push Lokesh like this, from his shoulders. No one pushes like this. It looks like the hands are holding him.’

Now everyone was even more intrigued. For some time, we remained puzzled. The thundering had stopped, but it had started raining. We had no choice but to begin our trek back to Musankiri. We kept looking for Lokesh, hoping we would find him somewhere below. When I realised what could have happened, I knew we had to inform the police. I took out my phone to call the police, but there was no network. I checked with everyone. None of the phones had a network. We decided to try again when we reached down. With a wet path, and walking downward, it was a difficult trek, and as we lost altitude, it became darker. At times when we walked through the dense forest, we had to use torchlights to move. In a way, I was thankful for the presence of three more people, it would have been a tense experience. I had

packed some sandwiches with me. I offered them to everyone, but despite the hard trek, no one had any appetite.

It was totally dark when we reached Musankiri. By now, we had lost our energy, we were wet and weary. It would have been an exhilarating experience, if this incident of Lokesh's disappearance had not happened. I checked my phone. It had network now. I searched for the nearest police station's number. The nearest police station was Ghansali, which was about an hour and half's distance away. Thankfully, the police station's number was available.

I tried calling the Police Station's number several times, but was not able to connect. The network was still not good enough. When we reached near the mini market of Musankiri, our phones started buzzing. We were in a good network now.

Just when I was trying the Police station's number again, Rohit's phone buzzed. It took seconds for Rohit to pick up the phone.

'Hello,' Rohit spoke softly. He probably did not have energy to speak loudly.

Rohit's face was contorted, as if he was in pain. I realised, maybe we all looked like that after a long trek.

'Hello. WHAT?' Rohit spoke again.

Someone on the other side spoke for a minute, while Rohit's face expression changed from pain to confusion. Suddenly his eyes widened as if he had received a shock.

'Wh... what?'

'LOKESH' he spoke loudly this time. All of us, were looking at him now. I disconnected the call I was making to the Police Station.

'What?' I asked Rohit.

Rohit looked at all of us, still listening to someone on the other side of the phone.

'Bro where are you?' he spoke.

He spoke for at least another minute, but there was certain relaxation on his face. Although it was a minute, it felt like an hour for all of us, who

were waiting for him to tell us what was going on. There was certainly someone who knew about Lokesh.

‘We are coming sir, thank you very much.’ He spoke with urgency, but with a smile on his face and disconnected the phone.

‘Can you tell us what happened?’ Bhupinder said what all of us wanted to say.

‘Lokesh is alive. I... I just spoke to him,’ Rohit said. His eyes were welling up with tears of joy.

'where is he?’

‘Here, very near to Musankiri,’

‘How did he get there?’

‘I am not sure, but we must not delay, we have to get moving, we can talk on the way,’ Suddenly Rohit had all the energy. In fact, all of us felt the surge of energy return to us.

Our cab was waiting for us. While on the way, Rohit told us about the phone call in detail.

‘The call was from someone in Nanua village, it is right next to Musankiri, maybe around fifteen minutes from here. The person calling had found Lokesh lying on a mud path, outside his home. As per him Lokesh was dazed, but not hurt. He brought Lokesh into his house.’

‘How did Lokesh reach there, on that mud path in the village?’ I asked.

‘I have no idea about how Lokesh reached there, but Lokesh had been in his house for some time, but he was not speaking anything. It is now that he finally spoke a bit and asked him to call us. Lokesh spoke only two words 'Come soon…,’

‘I do not know how, but he got saved and seems to have managed to trek back alone and then maybe he collapsed because of exhaustion.’ Aman said.

‘That may be possible’ Rohit said. I regretted not waiting for more time at Ragaz temple, as it would have been too difficult for Lokesh to trek back alone, but still was glad to know that somehow, he was not dead.

‘Anyways, thank god, Lokesh is saved,’ Both me and Preeti said at the same time. A few hours ago, we were convinced that Lokesh was dead, and now Rohit had just spoken to him, and we were going to meet him.

All of us had questions in our minds. We felt like someone who had won a lottery without buying the ticket, and having doubts until the reward was shown. Although Rohit has said that he had spoken to Lokesh, a thought, a very unlikely one, that it may be some very sick prank on us kept disturbing me.

‘Sandwiches?’ I took one from the box and offered the cold sandwiches to everyone again. This time everyone picked one. We were hungry, and there was hope in the air.

It had started raining when we reached Nanua. Rohit called the number again to get the directions.

‘He is saying, we can ask anyone in Nanua about the house of Mr. Pushkar Singh,’ Rohit said.

‘Seems like someone well-known around here,’ Aman said.

After a little more wandering, and asking around, we reached the house. From the distance the house looked small with a yellow light coming through a window, it turned out to be a double story standalone house as we reached. Pushkar Singh had recently retired from his Electricity Department job.

As soon as we saw Lokesh, the tiny irrelevant thoughts vanished from our minds. We rushed to him. He was lying on a divan bed in an area which looked like an extension of the room having glass windows on three sides.

Rohit hugged him. I knew Rohit was feeling guilty as he was the one clicking pictures of Lokesh.

‘Bhai, are you alright?’ Rohit spoke.

Lokesh nodded. For the time being this was enough for Rohit. Bhupinder patted and rubbed on Lokesh’s back. Rohit, Bhupinder, and Aman sat with Lokesh on the Divan.

The house owner, Pushkar Singh smiled when he saw the reunited friends. ‘He is alright. Please be comfortable,’ he said.

‘Sir, thank you so much,’ I said to Pushkar Singh.

‘Oh, please do not bother, make yourselves comfortable, I will be back in a minute.’ Pushkar Singh said and went out of the room.

The room was comfortably heated. It was a tastefully furnished multi-functional room. Other than the Divan area with three side windows, it had a sofa set in the centre, a large book rack covering one wall with a comfy winged chair and a small round table beside it. There was a book lying on the table, its bookmark almost near the end.

Preeti and I sat on the sofa. In a few minutes the Pushar Singh appeared with a tray containing several steaming cups of tea, and some biscuits. Preeti stood up and took the tray from him, and passed on the tea-cups to everyone. Pushkar Singh sat on the sofa in front of us. He looked at the boys and smiled. The huge relief was apparent on their faces. Only Lokesh had an expressionless face.

‘Sir, why did you bother with this? you have already done so much for us today,’ Preeti said. I nodded in agreement, knowing how difficult it would have been for him to bring Lokesh here and take care of him. From his room it was evident that he was the type of man who would enjoy sitting on the comfy chair and reading books while sipping hot tea. We had surely disturbed him.

‘Sir, we sincerely apologise for bothering you’ I said.

‘Oh, no, not at all. I am not doing anything. I am a retired man, I do not get a chance to host young people like you very often. It is my pleasure indeed.’

‘I am sure, if we had not barged in, you would have been relaxing. Perhaps reading some books,’ I said.

‘Ha-ha' Pushkar Singh's laugh filled the room. He continued, 'Your observation is good. I do enjoy solitude and reading books, but that does not mean that I do not like company. In fact, I think everyone has a story in them, and that one is usually more interesting.’

‘Sir, can I ask something?’ Preeti said

He nodded.

‘What about your family? Do you live alone?’ She asked. Preeti was genuinely concerned about him.

‘Well, I am never alone, these mountains and these books are my family,’

He appeared to be a jolly man. We looked at each other in confusion.

‘Have you never seen a sixty-year-old bachelor?’ he said with a laugh.

‘Oh I see,’

There was a moment of silence before more questions came to my mind.

‘Sir, when did you find Lokesh?’

‘It was around four in the evening. He was lying there, on the same road you had just taken to reach here. Luckily, I was out for a walk there, at the same time. At first, I mistook him for some drunk tourist and brought him home because he was not properly dressed, the cold would have killed him’

I looked at Preeti. She was also thinking the same thing, it was impossible. It was around four, or four fifteen when we arrived at Ragaz Temple and Lokesh had fallen only a few minutes before that.

‘Sir, are you certain it was around four. I mean maybe it was six or seven?’

The old man smiled.

‘I have been living here for more than five decades, and there is a lot of difference between four and seven here. I cannot mistake one with the other. It was four… Give or take five-ten minutes,’ He laughed… spilling a bit of tea from the cup he was holding.

Lokesh had not spoken anything, and this was worrying me.

‘Sir, we do not doubt you but the thing is…’ Preeti paused, probably thinking whether she should continue or not. She continued, ‘Pushkar ji, Lokesh was with us at Ragaz temple on Khait Mountain at around four this evening.’ Preeti said.

It was his turn to get shocked. He looked at Preeti and me. As if he

did not understand the words.

‘It is not possible. From Ragaz Temple, it takes at least an hour and half. How can he be here at four,’

‘Sir, that is what we are saying. We went for the Khait trek, and while returning, at Ragaz Temple, Lokesh’ I paused to think on what to say, I was not even sure what happened to him.

‘He, kind of, slipped and disappeared, we could not find him anywhere at that time,’ I said. I was thinking, if I should talk about the fingers on Lokesh’s shoulder.

‘Sir, it was at around four near Ragaz Temple, when Lokesh disappeared. I mean we thought that he slipped from there,’

Pushkar Singh seemed to be lost in thought, before he spoke.

‘I am sorry gentleman, but I cannot believe you… perhaps someone had fooled you, and led you to the wrong trek nearby while you thought it was Khait.’

‘Rohit, can you please show us the photos on your phone,’ Rohit came ahead and gave his phone to Preeti.

Preeti scrolled through the phone's picture gallery and opened photographs of the Khait temple, and handed the phone to Pushkar Singh.

Pushkar Singh carefully scrolled the photographs. In some photographs his eyes widened with surprise.

‘Are these photographs taken today?’ he asked

‘Yes I had clicked them today, you may see the time stamp in the photo details, if you so wish,’ Rohit spoke.

Pushkar Singh again scrolled through the photographs carefully. In between looking at us. He was not able to believe himself. He kept his tea-cup back on the table.

Then Rohit took the phone from him, and scrolled to the photo, which was taken just before Lokesh fell.

‘Sir, this one was clicked just before it happened.’

Pushkar Singh took the phone again in his hands and carefully

examined the photograph. He also zoomed in, especially on the finger pattern on the shoulder, and handed back the phone to Rohit. He appeared a bit dazed for a moment before speaking again.

‘I am certain it was four or four fifteen when I found him, I do not know how it is possible. How did he reach here,’ Pushkar Singh said, his eyes on Lokesh, who was sitting silently on the divan.

I knew how he felt because we were also going through the same thing. Lokesh fell at a place where he was not supposed to fall. Then those strange fingers on his shoulders… and then him reaching down here, near Pushkar Singh’s house at the same time, when he fell at Ragaz Temple, which should have taken at least a couple of hours.

‘It can only mean one thing.,’ Pushkar Singh spoke.

We looked at him intently waiting for his next words, but he stopped, deciding not to say anything.

‘Tell us sir, what can this all mean?’ Bhupinder spoke. Aman was still sitting with Lokesh, but intently listening to the conversation.

Pushkar Singh looked at all of us. He knew that we were desperate to know the answers. He sighed, deciding to continue.

‘It only means that your friend Lokesh did not fall, he could be...’ Suddenly the power went off, cutting Pushkar Singh’s sentence in between. The room became completely dark, and even more silent. The minute hum of electrical appliances like room heater, or refrigerator had also stopped.

‘Please stay where you are, I will get a candle,’ Pushkar Singh said. After a few seconds, his face appeared near the book case, in the light of matchstick. He lit a candle and placed it on the table near the sofa.

‘I have not installed a genset or battery backup. I kind of like this power cut. It gives me a chance to use the candle light. Candle light is the most romantic setting, is’nt it?... kind of funny for someone who had worked in the electricity department… ha-ha’ Pushkar Singh again laughed at his own joke. I wondered how a sixty-year-old bachelor could be discussing a romantic setting. This man was surely not out of the ordinary.

After a while our eyes got accustomed to the room lit with the candle.

‘Sir, you were saying that Lokesh did not fall. It appeared to us too, that he may not have fallen but what else could have happened?’ Preeti spoke. This was even more intriguing.

‘Look at him, No one could not be in that shape after falling from that ledge. Leave aside the shape, you would not have recovered the body of someone who had fallen from there’

This was true, Lokesh had some bruises, but that kind of fall would surely have broken his bones.

‘Sir, what is it then? None of this makes any sense.’ Preeti spoke.

Pushkar Singh was looking at Preeti, but his mind seemed elsewhere. He did not speak for a few seconds, weighing his words in his mind.

‘If you have time, I will tell you a story, I had heard it many years ago,’ Pushkar Singh said.

We were tired but we could not miss this one at any cost. Also, the cosy room lit by a single candle and quiet hills were a great setting for a story. The darkness makes us see the things in our mind. Children enjoy bed time story telling because they see and feel the story in their minds at that time. We were always fascinated by stories. Preeti and I both nodded at the same time.

Pushkar Singh started, ‘About forty years ago, my friend told me about this. My friend Chandan was a young boy from our village, who was also once found in a similar state near his house, like I had found Lokesh today. Chandan was twenty or twenty-one years old at that time.’

Other than Pushkar Singh’s words, there was complete silence. We had forgotten about the tea, which was cold by now.

‘He was a young Pahari boy and with a love for hiking. Once he trekked to the Khait temple all alone. He was like that, fearless. He did not care if anyone else was ready or not, he just started on his own. The trek was not like it is these days, there were not many cement steps. The temple at the peak was smaller. The Ragaz temple was not there. At that time also, the rules were set by our elders for Khait. Like no music, no loud noises or bright colours, but Chandan did not care about them. He was wearing a bright yellow shirt. Not because he liked the shirt, but as a show of defiance.’ He

chuckled.

I looked at Pushkar Singh in surprise. I did not know anything about the colour code.

‘Yes, the bright red or yellow colours were not allowed. Anyways, Chandan trekked alone and reached the peak in about three hours’

‘Wow, it had taken us nearly five hours to reach the peak’ I said.

‘Do not forget that he was a Pahari man, and at that time in the prime of his health. The trek used to remain deserted for most of the time. When he was trekking back something strange happened. He heard some noises, strange female voices. He was certain that there was no one. He suspected his mind was playing tricks on him. He was aware that lack of oxygen sometimes caused people to hallucinate. Although, to pass his time, he started whistling softly. He was good at it. When he got close to where the Ragaz temple is currently located, he felt like he was suddenly lifted off the ground. Something had lifted him, and held him by his shoulders’ Pushkar Singh stopped narrating for a moment.

All of us looked at each other. Lokesh, who was earlier disinterested, was also sitting upright and listening to the story.

Pushkar Singh continues, ‘Chandan could not see what it was, but could feel its strong hands, they were hurting his shoulders. Before that event, he did not even believe in our gram Devata. But that moment he truly remembered him, and before he fainted, he prayed to Devata for his safe return to his home. When he opened his eyes, he was at his house in the village. Someone from our village had picked him up from the steps of Khait. He was unconscious for the people around him for a couple of hours, but during that time a lot had happened to him. It was kind of a lucid dream, and it was not for hours, it felt like several days to him.’ Pushkar Singh and Lokesh exchanged glances. Lokesh was paying close attention to the story.

‘Chandan was not sure if it was a dream or not. In this experience, he saw himself in a different land, with lush green mountains, pleasant fragrance in the wind, and beautiful flowers dancing. He felt like he had died and was in heaven during this experience. The beauty of the place was beyond his wildest imagination. The weather was pleasant, with just the right amount of sun and shade. Everything was perfect.

Then a girl approached him. The way Chandan told me, I think I should not call her just a girl. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. She looked young, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old. Her dark hair was long and flowing softly with the wind. Her eyes were large and dark. She also had a sly grin on her lips. Her dress was like the top girls wear these days, but it was more colourful and shinier, with a long full-length skirt adorned with shining gems and golden things. You know, she was adorned with the most gleaming and beautiful jewellery. No one in this world could resist her charm. Chandan thought that she was an apsara. Keep in mind that he was a young and unmarried man at that time, and she was a stunningly beautiful young lady.' Pushkar smiled. He looked childish, and cute while talking like this.

'My name is Aabha, welcome to our world,' she said to Chandan and gestured to him to follow her. She started walking away from him. Hypnotised by her beauty, without any second thoughts, Chandan followed her like a puppy. She moved towards a big gate, which opened into a garden. There was a pleasant aroma everywhere. As they entered the garden, Chandan heard melodious music emanating from somewhere inside the palace in front of them. It was a multi-instrument music, with beats of Tabla (Indian Drums), clinks of Ghungroos, flute notes mixed with very sweet vocals, perhaps a group of girls was singing something. Later Chandan tried to recall the songs many times, but he was not able to recall the exact words of the song. All he remembered was that they were very soft and melodic to his ears, and he has not heard any music like that anywhere else.

Aabha, the girl, kept looking back and smiling at him. Chandan also had a wide smile. He felt like they were two people who shared some interesting secrets. He felt like he knew her, and kept following her. After climbing a large staircase and passing a long gallery. They reached a large hall.

'Chandan ji, please take that seat,' The girl said, pointing to a spot where cushioned mattresses and soft bolsters were placed. He took the seat and a small table was placed in front of him. In a moment, another beautiful girl came and served him food. The food was hot and its aroma immediately made him hungry. After he had the food, he was taken to another hall, where the musicians were there. He saw one very strange creature in that room. It had the body of a man, but had a head of a horse, and was holding a string

instrument’

Then Aabha spoke to the group of musicians, ‘Dear all, this is our new member Chandan, he will live with us now, please welcome him’. All of them nodded and smiled at Chandan, they seemed very happy except for the one with the head of a horse. Chandan could not know if the horse-faced man was happy or not. Then the musicians played their instruments and the apsaras performed a lovely dance. Aabha sat with him while they enjoyed the performance. Aabha held his hands, and they continued to look at each other and smile like a couple in love. Chandan was treated like a chief guest. Very soon, he felt like he was in love with Aabha. He had completely forgotten about his village, his parents, and only that world was real to him at the time.

Even though the day had turned to night, it was not completely dark. The Aabha led him to a large room at the end of the day. It was furnished with a large four-poster bed, as well as a large balcony overlooking the garden and the gate they had entered through.

The light curtains around the bed swayed in the soft fragrant breeze blowing through the room. The moonlight was falling in through the balcony. Chandan lay on the bed, contemplating what had happened, where he was. Even if it was a dream, he did not want it to end. He had not spoken to anyone yet. That is when Aabha returned. This time she looked more beautiful with shyness and naughtiness in her eyes. She came close to him and sat on the bed, and kissed him. As expected, Chandan had fallen in love with Abha.

The next day began with Aabha showing him the garden, and a large pond in which water was flowing in the form of a stream. Chandan jumped into the refreshing and cool water. Everything was as real as anything for him. Then Aabha joined him in the pond. In a way, Chandan was living the kind of life someone his age would not even have imagined in the wildest of his dreams. This went on for at least six days. Remember, Chandan was unconscious only for a couple of hours, but in that dream it was almost a week. The life in that dream was easy for Chandan to get used to.

On the seventh day, when Chandan and Aabha were walking in the garden, they heard a voice. Someone was calling Chandan’s name. At first, the voice seemed to be coming from clouds, but later he realised that it was from the huge gates of the palace. As he started walking towards the gate,

Aabha ran ahead of him and stopped him.

‘Do not go,’ she said.

‘Someone is calling my name,’ he said

‘Do not listen to it. Ignore him and come inside with me.’ She said, and he started walking towards the palace. The voice returned a few moments later, much louder this time. It was like a loud thunder that shook the entire building. Everything came to a halt, including the musicians inside the palace. Following that, he heard a loud bang and the gate opened.

He noticed a man, a giant man about ten feet tall, emerge from the gates. The man was dressed in a Pahari-styled turban, and his long hair fell over his shoulders. His upper garment was the Pahari styled Kurta. He had a long handlebar moustache. Hearing the loud sound, all the apsaras and musicians had come out in the garden. When they saw the giant man, they all joined hands and bowed to him.

The large man approached Chandan. At first Chandan was terrified. Then he noticed the man’s face had a strange kind of glow to it and a reassuring smile. Chandan bowed down to him. ‘Chandan, I am Nagraj, your village devata, I have come to take you from here, your parents are waiting for you,’

This was the first time Chandan thought about his parents since arriving in this world. It felt like a blow to his mind. He had not thought about them at all. Tears started flowing from his eyes. He was filled with remorse. His parents were getting old and were totally dependent on him, and here he had forgotten them. He walked along with the man. He felt like a small toddler walking alongside an adult.

‘Chandan,’ Aabha said. Chandan looked back at her. ‘We will meet again. I will wait for you,’ she said.

‘Aabha, I promise I will come back. I will complete my duties in the other world and then I will be yours forever.’ Chandan said and walked through the gate. As he stepped outside, he fainted again and when he opened his eyes he was back in his home.

Initially Chandan told this story to everyone, people listened with interest, asking him for more and more details. But after a while he realised

no one believed him. Some even took him for a madman, then he stopped telling this story, and focussed on his parents.

‘This story intrigued me a lot. I did a bit of study about this. To my amazement the kind of creatures Chandan had described were the same as the celestial beings *Gandharvas* are described in many ancient texts. I feel that they exist in a different dimension. But they are just super imaginative theories. Have you guys heard about the legend of *Siddhashrama*, a secret land, where some people had accidently reached, but when others tried to find out the physical location, no one succeeded to find it. It is mentioned even in the oldest Veda, the *Rigveda*. Those who went there claimed to have seen the divine saints such as *Maharishi Vashista*, *Kripacharya* and even *Bheeshma* from Mahabharat.’

'I am still wondering if Chandan was in such a different world or if it was just his mind playing tricks on him. Maybe he went insane for a while, but it was a very vivid experience for him.'

When Pushkar Singh finished telling his story, there was complete silence in the room. This story was obviously a dream, an illusion, according to me, possibly because Pushkar Singh and his friend Chandan might have heard such stories.

'He wasn't insane, sir,' we all turned to face the source of the voice; it was Lokesh, now standing on his feet. It was the first time he spoke since we arrived here. He stood up and approached Pushkar Singh.

‘I have been to the world you just described. I was there. The apsaras, the palace… musicians. I had seen some human-like creatures who had wings… very large wings.’ Lokesh's voice was shaky.

‘Yes, there were men with wings… Chandan had mentioned about them,’ Pushkar Singh spoke.

'The only difference is that I was not called up by a devata. It was some horrible Rakshash-like creature with a large body, a pot belly, and a massive sword in his hand. He also had hideous fangs. Everyone ran away from him. He called my name, then opened the gate for me, lifting and throwing me out.'

'I felt the same way when I was posing for the pictures at that point on Khait Mountain. I was lifted off the ground... fainted, and then that new

beautiful world with the most beautiful girl...' Lokesh stopped speaking.

'Why did you not say anything earlier?' Pushkar Singh said.

'I was shocked and confused about what was real and what was not. Then I heard your story and it made sense,' Lokesh said.

'This is incredible, the same experience as Chandan, it surely means there is something beyond our senses on Khait,' I said.

'Whatever happened, the bottom line is, Lokesh is fine and back with us,' Aman said, patting Lokesh on the back. Lokesh kept standing with his shoulders drooping and a sad face.

'What happened, and why are you so depressed?' Rohit asked Lokesh.

'Well, I am not sure if that world was real, but what I felt was. I recall her face. Sukeshi, I am missing her. 'I hope I get over her,' Lokesh said, this time with a sad smile.

'Sukeshi. Nice nam but better to focus on the girls in this world,' Aman spoke.

'And one thing is sure, enough of this trekking. Let us stick to the beaches for our next vacation,' Aman said. Everyone burst out laughing, even Lokesh smiled.

'Yes, whatever this magical world is, or this dream, it does not matter anymore,' Bhupinder spoke. Preeti and I nodded.

'Pushkar ji, thank you for sharing Chandan's story with us, it is fascinating. We would have loved to meet him and above all thank you for bringing Lokesh here and calling us,' Preeti said.

'It was my pleasure, and I am relieved that Lokesh is now okay,' Pushkar Singh said, his eyes set on Lokesh.

'Lokesh, you should thank Pushkar ji' Aman said.

'I do not know, I think it would have been better if he had left me unconscious,' Lokesh said. Pushkar Singh gave a knowing smile to that.

'Sorry Pushkar ji, I think he is not in his senses,' Aman said to Pushkar Singh.

'Do not worry, I can understand his situation,' Pushkar Singh said.

Aman was expecting some sharp remarks from Pushkar Singh. He had saved Lokesh and still Lokesh was talking like this.

‘Lokesh, do not worry, believe in yourself and have a good sleep tonight,’ Pushkar Singh said.

Lokesh walked out without saying anything.

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We dropped the boys in Ghansali, and reached our homestay in Karkheri. The next day was working, but both I and Preeti had sent in our leaves, as we planned to relax for a day.

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Pushkar Singh retired to his bed, as he always did, smiling. Today he had a lot to tell Aabha. As he passed through the gate, Aabha greeted him, still as excited to see him as she had been the first time. They were both young in this world.

'Welcome back, Pushkar, how was this one?' Aabha asked, taking Pushkar's hand in hers. They sat on the lawn's green grass. Pushkar rested his head in Aabha’s lap.

‘This one was interesting, met a young boy who has experienced this land,’

‘Oh, did you tell him?’ Aabha said, her fingers playing with Pushkar’s hair, and gently massaging his head.

‘I did tell him, through a Story,’ Pushkar told her about how he found Lokesh in his village, and then his friends came to his house and how he finally told his story using Chandan’s name. Aabha, as always, loved to listen to Pushkar’s stories.

After Pushkar finished the story, Aabha spoke.

'Pushkar, it has been hundreds of years that I have been waiting for you. You came here, but you kept returning. Now that you have fulfilled the responsibilities of your other life, it is time for you to stay here forever.'

Pushkar smiled, he knew it was the time. In one of his worlds where he was a Sixty-year-old bachelor, Pushkar Singh died peacefully in his sleep.

DEVATA’S ANGER

(Based on a True Event)

‘You're saying these palanquins move on their own?’ While watching a video of a Devata dancing on his phone, I asked my colleague, Bikram, about Devata palanquins.

‘Unquestionably. I have done it myself. Wait, I will show you,’ he said, and carefully scrolled the video to a point where one of the men holding the palanquin was just standing without holding the palanquin with his hands. The long bamboos were just resting on his shoulders, while his hands were resting on his sides.

‘As you can see, he's not holding it with his hands, but it is still bouncing up and down.’

It did move, while the man was not holding it. At times the bamboo sticks resting on shoulders would also bounce up, and be in the air for a moment. After a few more movements, the man had to hold the bamboo in his hands. They had to hold to avoid their shoulders hurting, and any chance of palanquin falling.

‘So why does he need to hold it again if it's moving on its own?’

‘He holds it only to keep it from falling, but he is not moving it. His shoulders are also strained as a result of these movements, so he must rely on his hands for support.’

He scrolled back, and we watched the video from the point where the man had rested the bamboo sticks of the palanquin on his shoulders without using his hands. I carefully looked to see if the man on the other side of the palanquin was moving it. He appeared to be holding it passively. The weight of the palanquin was in the centre, the man could not make the bamboo sticks jump up and down on the shoulders of the man on the opposite side. There was something magical there.

‘See, if the Devata has magical abilities, why doesn't he just fly the palanquin himself?’ Why does he need people to transport it?’ I asked.

‘See, this Devata's palanquin movement is a combination of Devata and humans. Humans support it against gravity, but they have no control over the dance or movements.’

Suddenly, both men in the video had to step sideways. They appeared as they were being dragged around by the palanquin. The music was getting louder and louder as the dance progressed. The two men were struggling to maintain control over the palanquin as it began to move sideways. Two more men leaped to the sides of the palanquin joining the struggle. Despite this, the Palanquin kept moving faster. When the Palanquin bent more than ninety degrees on one side, it lifted one of the men on the other side off the ground.

‘In... credible,’ were the words that came out of my mouth. For my friend Bikram, this was a normal thing. He had seen the Devata's dance many times in his native village. It was a part of his everyday life. But this was the first time I had seen anything like it.

‘Does everyone in your village believe in and trust the Devata?’ I inquired of him.

‘Everyone in my village believes in Devata; Devata is a real person for us, an elder who looks after and guides us. Even though some people in Himachal, usually the ones living most of the time outside, do not believe in Devatas.’

‘Really?’

‘Let me tell you about an incident in which the Devata became angry.’

Bikram and I were on a train from Chandigarh to Delhi, and we had about an hour before the train arrived in Delhi.

‘Oh, an Angry Devata, that's going to be interesting,’ I said, rubbing my hands in excitement. Such stories always excite me, whether I believe or not, whether I have faith or not, but they are fascinating.

Bikram began narrating the story.

In our Village, in Himachal Pradesh, a new temple was built for the

Gram-Devata. It had taken many years and a lot of money to be completed. There was a mela organised at that newly built temple. It was not a typical Mela. It was a much larger event. It was a mela for Devatas too. Other than all people, some Devatas from nearby and faraway places were also invited as most important guests. This one was for the Temple function, but the Devatas are also invited by people to their homes to bless on important events like when there is a wedding in the village or when someone builds a new home. Devatas also travel to far-flung locations on occasion, to meet other Devatas, or sometimes to local ponds or rivers to take a dip.

You may recall that last year I had to take a few days off from work unexpectedly. It was not an ordinary holiday planned to visit my village at that time. I had to go, because the Devata directed me to come and attend that Temple inauguration event. My father approached him, and the medium asked him to call me. I had no choice but to go there, even though I had not planned for the leave beforehand. A call from him *is* an emergency situation.

The crowd at the event was massive. People had come from far off villages and towns to attend the event. Everyone in the village had many visitors from other villages staying as guests with them. The large temple compound was packed to its capacity, and many had to stand outside the temple on the nearby hills. Some young people even climbed the nearby trees to watch the proceedings of the event.

I was witnessing a new temple's opening for the first time. It was a celebration. Despite the biting cold, the atmosphere was electrifying. The temple compound was packed to the brim with worshippers. Most of them were dressed in traditional colourful *Himachali* attire and wore *Himachali* caps. Every day of the week, there were public feasts. Villagers danced in unison for long periods to the beat of drums, bells, and flutes. If one group became tired, another one took its place. Even though I am not a dancing kind of person, my feet tapped on their own and swayed to the music. The air carried the fragrance of incense. It seemed to be infused with energy, making everyone dance, including the Devatas. On the second day, there were two Devatas in the Temple. The thick shining black hair moved beautifully when the Devata's danced. The Devatas would occasionally come along together, dance, and talk to each other. This did not necessitate the use of a medium. When Devata's moved, the men in charge of the palanquins were almost dragged along with him. It was a tiring process. After about an hour, the

Devata would stop for a while. At this point the men who would take rest and a new group will take their place for the next round of Devata's dance.

There was one Devata from a distant village who did not enter the temple. It did not let the palanquin enter the gate. Instead of entering, it kept moving in circles around the Temple. I went towards the gate, where some people from that Devata's Village were sitting, while another group moved with the Devata, circling the temple. When I asked them about this, they said that they had been doing this since the previous evening.

'Namaste Chacha,' 'Namaste,' They knew that I was a local, and they were all guests to me. Everyone from our village was acting like a host.

'Did you eat your breakfast?'

'Yes, we did, it was good,'

'Why aren't you going to the Temple?'

'If our Devata isn't coming in, how can we?' He inquired again.

'Devata is not entering the temple? but why?'

'He is upset because we arrived on foot while the other ones arrived by cars and trucks'

'What are you going to do now?'

'We do not know; we will see if Devatas can talk to each other and solve their problem. He is not saying anything right now,'

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There were four young men from a Village named Rohru. Like all others, they were also invited for the event. Purab, one of them, was my age. He and his friends were staying as guests in a Village house, as were many others.

Although they belonged to the Village Rohru, they had lived most of their time in the city. They were also invited because the entire village was invited to this event. They did not have interest in the temple, but they were drawn to this village because it is one of the most beautiful. It was more of a leisure trip to the mountains for them, with free lodging and food.

It was the second night, and they were in the room given to them by

their host. Purab sat on a chair near the window, his feet on the bed, his shoes still on. He reached into his pocket for a cigarette.

What are you doing, Purab? They will not like it,' Rishabh warned. Rishabh was lying on a cot nearby. The Villager has given them his best room on the first floor, complete with two separate cots and a window overlooking the mountains. The house was an old wooden structure that provided the type of authentic experience for which many tourists would gladly pay five-star rates.

Purab lit his cigarette and took a puff, directing it out from the window.

'Nothing will happen, they don't even enter our room without knocking,'

'Well, we must still...' Rishabh spoke.

Purab interrupted him and asked, 'Why are you such a chicken?' Rishabh, look at the weather and the valley. It begs for a smoke. Here, try one,'

'No, I do not smoke,'

'Umm… I need to have one after dinner,' Purab said, extinguishing the cigarette stub on the wooden window-sill, and then throwing it out.

'Hey, what do you think about going out tomorrow and having something better than this cattle food stuff?' Purab exclaimed, suddenly sitting up straight.

'What exactly do you have in mind?' Rishabh inquired.

'See, here they will serve cattle food... I am talking about the real food this village is famous for, the mutton. Our visit here will not be complete until we sink our teeth into the delicious, soft mutton and wash it down with the local liquor.'

'Not this week, all the mutton and liquor shops are closed. Nobody in the village is having it during the Temple's inauguration.'

'What? You mean there will be no mutton or liquor for the entire week?'

'Yes, it is better that we eat what our host offers us, which is also

really good, by the way,' Rishabh said.

'Bloody ignorant villagers.' Purab was enraged.

'Shhh… do not say anything negative about the host. 'It is a matter of Devata,' Rishabh said, angry but hushed.

'What Devata? it is nothing, just an elaborate joke,'

'Oh my god, what are you saying, idiot? You cannot even think negatively, its Devata's village,'

'Why are you so scared, and why do you seem to believe these ignorant people? Do not tell me you believe the Devatas have power?'

Rishabh remained silent.

'Come on, tell me, do you think Devata can hear, talk, or dance?' Purab laughed heartily, as if he had cracked a joke.

'Purab, Devatas are not invented overnight. They have been here since the beginning… Thousands of years ago. It is not some superstition. They have the power. That is why people pray to them.'

'Oh, come on, stop please, I am going to hurt my stomach laughing. Devatas have no power, and they are all made for the sake of money. While these people remain uneducated, a few shrewd ones will continue to gain money in the name of Devata. This all is an elaborate drama'

Rishabh sighed, turned away from Purab, and went to sleep.

Early in the next morning, the Temple was packed, and the festivities continued. People sang, danced, and enjoyed the tasty morning prasad. The priest sang prayers. It seemed like there was something going on at every turn in the temple. The children rushed around the temple, laughing, and playing games.

It was around nine in the morning when the main Devata of the temple started dancing. It was earlier than usual and the dance was also jumpier and more vigorous. It took four men to hold the palanquin. The Devata danced and moved around the temple compound. The dance movements were different from yesterday. Yesterday the moves were playful, much softer. But today they were stronger and faster. The men were quickly getting tired, but the dance continued. The Devata's team of a priest and a

medium kept standing near the Devata with joined hands.

It was eleven when one of the four men holding the palanquin fell. His place was quickly taken by another guy. The men had to change while the palanquin kept moving. By noon, everyone in the village knew about the non-stop dancing of the Devata. The temple was crowded, but other than the Devata's dance, everything had stopped. People were watching the Devata in wonder. This had never happened earlier. Devatas always stopped dancing after a while and gave rest to their teams.

By now, it was known that Devata was upset with something. His Priest, still standing with joined hands, spoke in a loud voice, 'Hey Devata, why are you not stopping, why are you punishing us? what have we done wrong?' He looked towards the medium, but there was no response from Devata. The Devata kept on dancing. The crowd grew bigger now.

This guy Purab and his friend reached Temple at one in the afternoon, at the time when Lunch was to be served. Exactly when they entered the Temple, this Devata stopped dancing. There was a collective audible sigh of relief from the crowd.

The Devata's medium who was standing with joined hands and eyes closed spoke up, 'Devata is angry,'

Everyone, almost a thousand people were silently listening. It was like a stadium full of people, but everyone was silent.

'Someone has insulted him, last night in this Village. He has come from Rohru. Devata wants them to come forward'

Purab and Rishabh looked at each other. Rishabh had that I-told-you-so look. But both did not say anything. The medium spoke again.

'If he does not want to come forward himself, Devata will tell his name.'

Purab had this bad feeling that it was his name, which will be called. He had no belief, but it was happening in front of him. He had spoken about Devata in front of Rishabh. And Rishabh was with him since the night. Neither he nor Rishabh had said anything to anyone. They have been together since they got up in the morning. There was no way anyone could have known what they had said in the closed room.

It was a scandal, everyone in the Village was talking about who it could be. The anger of main Devata for whom this Temple was being inaugurated. The Villagers were getting angry. Everyone from Rohru was being looked at with anger. Some elders of Rohru started asking around their fellow villagers on who could insult the Devata.

‘Purab, you must go ahead yourself, or it can be worse if Devata tells your name.’

‘Wh… What? I was joking. Why is this happening?’ He thought about running away, but he suddenly felt so weak in stomach that he could not lift his feet. His feet seemed to be stuck to the ground.

‘Purab, there is no use hiding. Go ahead, and ask for forgiveness… now’ Rishabh said.

Purab knew that Rishabh was right. He slowly walked ahead. His feet moved this time. Oblivious to the people staring at him, Purab kept walking slowly. He reached near the medium. The villagers fell silent as he approached the Devata. All eyes were on him now.

‘It was me, please forgive me Devata’ he said with his eyes on the ground.

‘No, you will not be forgiven,’ The medium who was in a trance state now spoke.

‘Please forgive me Devata, I will never repeat those words. I have seen your power now. Please accept my apology,’ Purab fell on his knees.

‘No, I will punish you,’ The Devata said, through his medium.

Before anything more could be said. The other Devata who had come from Rohru, Purab’s Village, shook up and moved with a jerk towards the main gate of the temple. His Palanquin seemed floating over the mass. The unprepared palanquin bearers were dragged with the sudden movement. Despite the crowd blocking the way, the palanquin waded through it. Many men fell aside with the sudden impact. The Palanquin stopped at the Temple gate.

‘Do not punish my people,’ said the other Devata's medium.

‘If you punish my people, I will leave and never return,’ he spoke

again. Even though I believe in Devata's powers and that their blessings have helped me numerous times. I had never seen anything so powerful. One Devata is enraged and wants to punish, while the other is protecting his people.

After a while the palanquin of main Devata moved and went to the Gate near Rohru's Devata.

'I have to punish him, he has insulted me,' His medium spoke for him.

'He is from my village, and a guest. You cannot punish him,'

The palanquins kept standing at the Temple Gate. The whole crowd stood still and silent. They were supposed to enjoy the feast now, but no one touched the food. It was important to resolve this matter. After some time, the new temple's head went to the Devatas. He bowed to both Devatas before standing with his hands clasped together, facing the main Temple Devata.

'Devata, we understand this man has sinned, and only you have the power to punish or forgive him. It had taken our Village so many years to build this temple. We worship you, you are our benefactor, our god, everything. With your blessings, we want you to let this Temple be inaugurated, stay here, and bless us. But your anger today is a punishment to all of us. Even those who have worked hard for this day. We want to celebrate. Please calm down, I pray to you. It is my prayer to let the festivities go on, please enjoy, and let us enjoy,'

The man spoke as if he was speaking to his angry grandfather. But the impact was there. Both Devata's came back in. After a while they stood with their heads joined together, silently talking to each other. Then after a while, they danced together. Their movements were slow and playful. A hurray spread through the crowd. Music started again. Everyone, wherever they were standing, started dancing again. The festivities and feast began again. That boy, Purab, spent the rest of his days in the village doing *seva* (Service) in the temple. To this day he is a staunch devotee to the devata.

'See, that is how Devata's are. They are made from us, and we are made from them. We believe that they are our guardians and they become that,'

'Surely,' I said, rubbing my arms to soothe the goosebumps down as

we were about to reach Delhi.

MIDNIGHT PARTY

‘Are you driving?’ Sodhi asked when he heard a blaring horn over the phone.

‘Yes, I am going to get some drinks for tonight. I am talking over my car’s audio system, Do not worry?’ Ajay said, rolling up the car’s window.

‘Are you partying with someone?’ Sodhi inquired.

Ajay chuckled and spoke, ‘I party everyday, just with myself,’

‘Ajay…it is not good to party all by yourself. Come to Chandigarh we will enjoy it together,’ Sodhi said. Ajay knew what Sodhi was talking about. It had been a routine with him for the last few months since Preeti and he divorced.

When Ajay returned to his home after signing the final divorce papers, the once-familiar walls of his home felt like they were going to crush him. Even if he was at home, he did not *feel* at home anymore. His home did not feel like home, for him being at home was the same as sitting in the office, waiting at the airport, or being out in the street. There was no place where he would feel any peace. He felt suffocated. The only thing he found solace in was alcohol. It is a cliché thing, but clichés are for a reason. A few drinks before he hit the bed, and the world faded away. Though he would lie down, he did not really sleep. What he felt was more like an uncomfortable stage between the unconsciousness and wakefulness. The number of drinks to bring the same effect were increasing slowly. Working in a health organisation he was aware that he was going down the spiral. He could not help himself. He did not want to help himself. After the divorce he felt like he had chopped down his life with his own hands.

Fortunately, a month ago, a text appeared on his phone bringing a little ray of sunshine in his dark life.

‘Hi… I am wondering if you are the same Ajay who was in the Ravindra Public School, Chandigarh.’

It was from Sodhi, who had spent a lot of time finding most of the old classmates through social media and bringing them together once again. He had sent such messages to all friends. It takes a certain courage to ask someone if they know you. Even if you are sure that they are the same person. Sodhi had shown that courage, and brought together the old schoolmates after more than fifteen years. For Ajay, it brought a welcome change in his life. It brought back that phase of his life which was not in any way related to his marriage and divorce.

There are some friends who will keep pestering you but will keep in touch with you. Such friends are the necessary glue of a friendship. Sodhi was like that. Ajay kept falling back into his depressing moods, but once Sodhi had found him, he never let him go. He made sure to keep calling Ajay regularly. Ajay still relied on alcohol, but restricted it somewhat. Sometimes when chatting with his group of his old friends, including Sodhi, Nitin and Akshit, he totally forgot about the drinks. This interaction was becoming a second and good addiction for him. On those calls, the old friends laughed and brought their old memories back to life.

‘I will be in Chandigarh next week for a small business meeting, and lot of time,’ Ajay eagerly declared, when Sodhi mentioned the idea of them meeting in Chandigarh.

Just the thought of meeting his friends after so long in Chandigarh ignited a spark in Ajay. He had forgotten that he could have such a burst of energy in him. The memories of School made him feel like a child again. He recalled the simple birthday parties which they used to do at their homes in those days. Bunking the School, and going to the lake side. The random walks every evening with friends, with no planning, scheduling, or appointments.

‘Next week? Sure?’ Sodhi said.

‘Yes, and I plan to stay in Chandigarh through the weekend’ Ajay said.

‘You know next week Nitin is also coming, and probably Akshit is also having a long weekend.’ Sodhi told him.

‘Oh wow, Nitin and Akshit, How are they?’

‘Both are doing well and are very near to Chandigarh. Looks like the next week might be a perfect time for our small reunion,’

‘Lovely idea Sodhi, I can’t wait to see you guys,’

‘We will have three free days here that is a rare thing’

‘We must do something, some big party,’

‘I think we should have some fun, a road-trip or something. What do you say?’ Sodhi asked

‘Well, I am in for a Road trip but three days may be too short. See, if we drive from Chandigarh to Jaipur, it would be a lot of drive, one day on each side. I would prefer spending more time chilling with you guys.’ Ajay said.

‘What else? Can we just chill in Chandigarh?,’ Sodhi said.

‘We can do that, but we need to do something. We are going to meet after fifteen years. We need to plan something. A boys-only kind of plan, without the families, you know’ Ajay was excited.

‘In that case a road trip would be perfect, but where can we go? What about Shimla?’

‘Again, it will be a lot of driving, and practically we will have only one day of fun,’ Ajay said, while he wanted the trip, he wanted minimal driving, and to spend more time where they could chill together after such a long time.

Sodhi thought for a moment, and then spoke.

‘Let’s go to Kasauli, it is not much of a drive and we all like it.’

After a moment of pause, ‘You are absolutely right Sodhi, why didn't I think of that sooner. Kasauli is the best option, we can reach there within a couple of hours and enjoy three whole days, Superb idea,’

The mention of Kasauli brought another set of memories for Ajay. Kasauli is a small hill station near Chandigarh. Ajay had been there with his family a couple of times, but later in college, it became his favourite destination to chill with friends. If the weather was slightly cool or rainy in

Chandigarh, they would drive to Kasauli, because at that time it gets awesome in Kasauli. It is like, if there are clouds in Chandigarh's sky, they go to Kasauli to get above them. When Ajay fell in love, his first proper date was at Kasauli, and when they bitterly broke up, Kasauli was the destination for his solo drive. Kasauli had a calming effect on Ajay. In his younger days, it was a second home for Ajay.

'Then let us make it final, I will also call Nitin and Akshit, we will leave on Friday morning and please, do not make any last-minute changes,' Sodhi said.

'This time it is sure, hundred percent,' Ajay said smiling. Ajay had changed many plans at the last minute, but this time it worked.

On a cold morning of November, the four friends were on the way to Kasauli. Having some road-trip fun on the way they were there in two hours.

They had not booked the hotel in advance. They were not worried about getting a hotel room, as the hotels in Kasauli filled only during the weekends, and it was a working day.

Kasauli is a tiny city with a population of less than five thousand. It is very near to Chandigarh, but with a very different and cooler climate. Just three hours ago the friends were in the plain wide roads, comfortable in their T-shirts, and now they had to put their jackets on. They parked their car at the multilevel parking just outside Kasauli, and went on exploring Kasauli on foot. The Kasauli Mall road is a narrow lane with small shops for souvenirs, clothes and many small food outlets offering a variety of food like Momos, Noodles, Maggi Noodles, as well as North Indian Paranthas.

After a walk around the hill station, clicking a lot of photographs, they started looking for a hotel. They walked into the hotels which looked okay to them from outside. Other than a nice view of hills, they were looking for an open terrace where they planned to sit in the evening, enjoying the weather while chatting and recalling old memories.

Looking for a suitable hotel, they walked back from the mall road to the main entrance point of Kasauli, and took the other road going uphill. At the beginning of this road, on their left side, the first building was the famous Christ church. Ajay had seen this church many times, but only as a passerby from outside. But today he felt drawn to the Church.

Ajay went inside the gate, the friends followed. They chatted up with a local man, who told them that this Church was standing from over a century and a half, the oldest in Himachal Pradesh. And, the tombs in the graveyard behind the church were even older. The church was designed in gothic style architecture with a green roof, and stained-glass windows. It had a beautiful clock tower. They could feel the vibes of the era when Britishers ruled India. Ajay imagined Englishmen wearing long coats walking around this Church, matching their pocket watches looking at the clock tower. But there were no British people there, only Indians… mostly not Christians.

'I think we have enough knowledge about the Church. Now, let's move and find ourselves a hotel, I am hungry' Sodhi said, pulling Ajay away from the Church's gate.

Just a few steps ahead of the Church, they found a weathered grey building with a row of windows, certainly an example of British era architecture. It was also made of cut stones and looked as old as the church, with similar green roofs. A narrow pathway from a small gate was leading to the reception. 'Hotel Grand Regal' was written above the gate. The friends looked at each other, and with approving nods, they decided to check this hotel.

As they entered the reception area, they found what they were looking for. Beyond the small reception, towards the back of the hotel there was a lovely terrace. It was exactly the kind they had in their mind. It had a row of rooms on one side and was wide open towards the back side of the hotel. It was open and yet had a kind of enclosure from three sides and one wide side open towards the mountains. It had the best of both worlds. They could enjoy the view and weather of the hill, while having the food, comfort, and security of the hotel.

'We need two rooms for two days' Ajay spoke to the receptionist. They planned to stay on a twin sharing basis.

Before receptionist could reply, Nitin spoke to Ajay and Sodhi, 'Guys, please do the formalities while we check the view from the terrace.'

'Let is finalise the tariff first,' Ajay said.

'We have full trust in you. We are okay with whatever you decide,' Nitin said, and handed over his Driving licence to Ajay. Akshit did the same,

and they walked ahead to the terrace.

Ajay turned back to the hotel receptionist.

‘Sorry sir, we have only one room available. The upper floor rooms are being renovated, so room availability is low’

Ajay and Sodhi looked at each other, they had not expected a hotel like this to be full on a weekday. Akshit and Nitin were already sitting on the chairs in the terrace, it was evident from their faces that they too liked the hotel ambience.

‘But we need two rooms,’ Ajay said to the receptionist. For a moment, he thought about managing in one room but cancelled it. He was accustomed to taking more space while sleeping. Especially since his wife, Preeti had left him.

‘Sir, please see the room once, it is quite spacious. We can arrange additional beddings to accommodate all,’ the receptionist suggested.

‘It is ok, if you do not have two rooms, we shall check with some other hotels. Though we like this property,’ Sodhi said.

‘Sir,’ the receptionist said looking towards a man who was sitting at the side of the reception desk, writing something very carefully in a notebook. He was the manager of the hotel. He looked up towards the receptionist, took a moment, and then nodded silently. Some secret communication happened between them.

The receptionist turned back to Ajay and spoke, ‘Sir, there is one more room on that side. It is actually a double room. We can offer it to you tonight, but tomorrow we will change to some other vacated room.’

‘Hope you are not charging anything extra for a bigger room,’ Ajay said. He would have agreed even if they charged extra, because he knew they were not going to find that amazing terrace anywhere else. He quickly handed their IDs to the receptionist.

‘No sir, it will be the same tariff as for the other one,’

‘Can we sit there… on that terrace, and have our dinner there?’ Sodhi said, pointing to the terrace.

‘Sure sir, we will serve the dinner there on the terrace,’

‘This building looks quite old, isn’t it?’ Sodhi asked the receptionist.

‘Indeed sir, very old, a hundred and fifty years old.’ There was pride in his voice. It was as old as the Christ Church. Everything did look old. The walls were thick, made of bare grey stones. Even the electrical switches in the hall were of an obsolete design, the big black ones. They perhaps used them to maintain the vintage look.

‘I hope we do not encounter any ghosts here,’ Nitin joked.

The manager smiled at Nitin’s joke and handed over the room keys to Ajay.

The hotel’s normal room was a big surprise for them. The receptionist was right about the room size. It was big enough not only for the four of them, but could even accommodate their families in a single room with some extra beds. Even the attached bathrooms were big enough to accommodate four people. It felt a bit like wastage of floor space. The second room was a double-bedded one. And it was not a regular double bed, it had two separate king sized four-post beds, even bigger, with a similar very large bathroom. Sodhi and Ajay were amazed to see the room. They decided to take this one, as both could get a full double bed to sleep in. Nitin and Akshit took the other one.

It was decided to quickly freshen up and join for dinner at the Terrace. All friends rushed to their rooms and freshened up for the evening. Ajay saw Sodhi come out from the bathroom and put his damp underwear on one of four posts of his four-post bed to dry.

‘Oye Sodhi, what are you doing?’ There was enough space to hang-dry the clothes in the bathroom itself.

‘See, we have come here as bachelors so our rooms should reflect that bachelor vibe so this underwear is adding that required touch to our room’ Sodhi replied. Sodhi had a funny style of doing everything. Since he had his own separate four-post bed, Ajay let Sodhi have his way with it.

Once refreshed, they ordered food, and also brought in a lot of snacks from the stalls on the mall road and sat on the lovely terrace. For once, no one cared about the calories or cholesterol. The air was cool and blowing softly. Most guests were couples or families, who were tired from the journey and preferred to stay in the cozy rooms, so the friends had the complete

terrace to themselves.

With the food and drinks on the table, the mood was set for recalling memories. The school friends getting together after such a long time, brought out the hidden kids in them. They had many stories and experiences to share. The four friends had spent ten years together, and then got separated without any means of contact. They had not even said proper byes to each other at that time. The online social networking sites and mobile phones were not around in those days. The last time they met, they did not know that it would be fifteen long years before they would see each other again.

‘I remember the first day of my school, I was asked to sit beside a girl as a punishment, as I was too noisy, it was a delightful punishment. They should have continued this punishment up to senior classes too. Ha-ha,’ Nitin said, munching on the hot pakoras.

‘In senior classes such punishments will only increase the noisy boys,’

‘Do you remember the Shefali of Section-A?’ Akshit said

‘I remember her as well as her father, who thrashed poor Rohit’ Ajay said.

Akshit interrupted him, ‘Remember the letter Rohit was giving to Shefali, which landed on Principal’s desk and his father had to meet principal’

‘I remember the next day, Rohit’s face was as red as a Monkey’s ass,’ Sodhi said.

For Ajay this meeting meant a lot more. It was therapy for him. He was in mental agony and depression due to his family issues. After his daughter was born Ajay decided to ensure a better future for his family. He worked hard, and reached higher up the corporate ladder. But somewhere little squabbles sprouted between him and Preeti. After a while both started discussing their problems with outsiders, and the squabbles turned into unsolvable differences. The egos played a huge role in spoiling their own lives, and ultimately one Preeti left the house with his daughter, and a few days later, Ajay received the divorce notice in his mail.

Ajay could not remember the last time he had laughed like this. The

conversation flowed effortlessly. For the first time in more than fifteen years, Ajay was eager to speak out… to share his memories and thoughts, and they were not sad and depressing. They discussed random things including their funny nick names in school, the mischief they had done, the punishments they got, their teachers… good and bad, the girls, spirituality and even some funny politics. The topic of discussion did not matter, the fun they had while discussing mattered.

These were the moments to cherish and preserve. This happiness and pleasure of friendship was a reality. Still, accustomed to the depression, Ajay found it hard to believe that he met his friends after more than fifteen years, and they were chilling together in Kasauli. Ajay tipped the server generously. The server kept bringing the drinks and hot snacks for them. In these moments, they all realised that beneath their artificial personality facades built over the years, they were the same carefree kids as they were in the school. That evening Ajay rediscovered himself. He remembered what he was before he had a job and a wife, and a divorce. His family was a major part of his world, but now he recalled that there is still a world which does not get over with his family going out of his life. He was something beyond that.

It was well after midnight when they came back to their rooms. For Ajay, it was a rare night when he had less drinks and more talk. Which meant that he was in better senses. Sodhi just took off his shoes and jumped on his bed. Ajay turned the lights off and lay down on his bed.

‘It was nice time Sodhi, Thank you for making this happen,’ Ajay said.

‘Hmm,’

‘We should keep doing this at least twice a year,’

‘Hmm’ This time his ‘hmm’ was fainter. Ajay waited for a few seconds and spoke again.

‘Sodhi look, there is something... A *Churel* behind you’ Ajay said to check Sodhi’s sleep level.

If awake, Sodhi would have immediately come back to Ajay with some witty reply like *Churel* is his girlfriend, and Ajay should not treat her like his sister-in-law. But Sodhi said nothing, he was fast asleep.

Ajay spent some time lying on the bed. Even though he was exhausted, sleep still seemed far away. He had a renewed energy running through him.

'I wish life was one big party like this,' Ajay whispered to himself. He wanted to continue their chat till morning. But Nitin had some online meetings the next morning, so he convinced others to go to sleep. Still Ajay was happy that this happened.

He looked around, the room felt even bigger at night. In Kasauli, the market including the food stalls are mandatorily closed by nine p.m. The hotel receptionist had informed them about the strict rules that even walking around outside is not allowed at night. The Police patrol on the rounds will ask any wandering tourist to return to their hotels. The rule is because besides a beautiful hill station, Kasauli is also a cantonment area. This meant that there was absolute silence, a rare thing in cities, and other popular hill stations. Even the fan noise was not there. An old ceiling fan was hanging above, but there was no need to turn it on. It was cool inside the room but not cold enough to use a room heater. Ajay was wearing a smart watch, but if he had an analogue wrist watch, he would have been able to hear its ticking. After being in the noisy and fun conversations with his friends, Ajay found this level of silence a bit unnerving. He thought about turning the fan on, just for its sound. But then he dropped the idea thinking that it may make the room too cold, and old the fan might turn out to be creaky and loud enough to wake Sodhi up.

Ajay closed his eyes, trying to sleep. But sleep eluded him. After trying for a minute, he gave up and opened his eyes. He looked at the four posts of the bed standing around him, they looked like they were some thin tall men watching him. He smiled at his funny imagination. After some time, he gave up on trying to sleep. He sat up and looked around, the room was large but there was no working table. Instead, there were two large Sofa Seats in a corner beside a curtained window. Even the Sofa upholstery was in a dark colour, adding to the darkness of the room. Sleeplessness was not new to him, but today it was different. Usually when he was not able to sleep, he made a drink to get drowsy. But today he decided to do something which he had not done in a long time to update his diary. He wanted to write about the day, to save the awesome memories created. During his divorce proceedings and many stressful months before that, he could not focus enough to sit and

write anything. Also, there were no memories worth preserving.

Since Ajay had not packed any slippers with him, he wore his shoes and took out his laptop from the bag kept on the bed side table. He tiptoed up to the sofa and sat on it without turning on any light. He did not want to disturb Sodhi, who was sleeping soundly. He turned his laptop on. The backlit keyboard helped him to type in the dark. From a distance one would see only Ajay's face lit from the light of his laptop hanging amid the absolute darkness all around it.

He started typing his heart out in the journal. The invigorated feelings, the memories, the bliss. He was lost in the words, when he heard a sound. It was like someone had stuck a giant piano's keys randomly. And the source of sound seemed near, very near, just outside the window behind him. He stopped typing for a moment, listening carefully. He looked at Sodhi, checking if he had woken up due to the sound. But Sodhi was still sound asleep. There was no sound besides Sodhi's faint snores. He shrugged and returned his focus to his journal. A few moments later, he heard the piano sound again, the random notes. This time he heard it very clearly. It was coming from within the room, just behind him. But there was no piano in the room. He stood upright trying to sense every small sound, when felt something cold touch his neck. He shivered, more with fear than cold. It was a draft of cool air hitting his neck. This was unusual, there was no draft of air earlier in the room. There were no windows, only fake ones with curtains. His heart was pounding. He checked the time, it was a few minutes past two. Sodhi was still sleeping. Ajay thought of walking him up, but decided not to, thinking that Sodhi was capable of making fun of him for this for the rest of their trip together.

Ajay turned on the flashlight of his phone and looked around. There was a curtain on the wall behind his sofa. He got up and slid the curtain. It was not a window. It was a two-panel door with glass in the upper portion. He brought his phone's flashlight close to the glass. There was a small room on the other side of this door. He wondered how missed seeing this room earlier. Perhaps, in the hurry of getting ready for the terrace, they did not check out these things. In this room, he found the source of sound, it was a dusty old piano on one side of the room. The room was so small that it hardly had the space for two people other than the piano. But who was playing the piano? He thought for a while and then declared that the noise might have

come from a cat or other such animal stepping on the piano keys. But how did the cat come in?

He looked ahead, in front of him, across the little room there was another similar door. When he looked carefully, he noticed that it was slightly ajar. He felt a bit relieved as the mystery was solved. This explained the cold draft as well as the piano sound. Someone had forgotten to shut the door, and that allowed a cat or some animal to enter and then jump on the piano keys. He took a mental note to complain with the hotel manager about this carelessness. Thinking that the cat may come again from the door and jump on the piano, he decided to close the other door. He pulled down the bolts holding the door and slowly pushed it open. He did it carefully, not making any noise and stepped inside the small room. The piano was on his left side. He had never seen a full-size piano like this. It looked bigger than his expectation. He slid his finger lightly on it. There was a thick layer of dust. There was a painting hanging above the piano. He brought his phone's light close to it. He could see two faces staring back at him expressionlessly. It was a painting of two British women in the Victorian era. Their being British was apparent from their long coats, with some frilly thing around the neck, and above all the decorated hats. One of the two appeared younger, with rosier cheeks. They were probably a mother and a daughter. He made another mental note to ask the receptionist about them in the morning.

The room smelled of old dust and moisture. And no wonder it was cold, the other door being left ajar. He walked towards the other door and looked outside. The door was leading to an open area. As he was about to shut the door, he heard a sound… a woman's laugh. It was coming from a distance. It seemed that there were other people like us who were partying in the night. While he was standing there for a moment, he heard many other sounds… glasses clinking, more laughs... some people speaking. Even though Ajay could not understand what the people were speaking, their accent was surely British. They were probably foreigners… It was not a surprise, the old man at Church had told us that tourists come from all over the world to Kasauli to see the old Christ Church.

Ajay guessed that the receptionist had not told them about the lovely garden to offer privacy to their foreigner or VIP customers for their private parties. For a moment he thought about going back to his room, but then decided to have a look at this midnight party. He was not sleepy anyway, he

thought perhaps some walk will help him sleep later.

He walked out of the door. It was cold… colder than the terrace. He thanked himself for wearing his shoes, besides his wool and fleece pyjamas. The voices were coming from behind a row of tall fir trees. He turned his phone's flashlight on. There was a narrow trail leading to the trees. The sky was inky black with no moon. After a few steps, Ajay looked back at the dark outline of the hotel building. Except for a solitary yellow light from one of the windows, it was completely dark. He walked ahead in the direction of the voices and they seemed a bit nearer now. A sudden rustling sound shook him with surprise. His heartbeat increased. He was not the one to get scared easily, but the unfamiliar place made him a little cautious. The dark had dissolved the boundaries. It mixed everything. The noise came again. It was from the tree tops far above him. He pointed his phone's flashlight upward. The trees were huge, and the flashlight was tiny. He could not see anything. *Must be some monkeys or baboons jumping from one tree to another*, he declared and continued walking. After about another ten meters, he saw faint light coming making shadows of the tree trunks ahead. He stopped behind a tree to look at the scene.

There were garden lights mounted on small poles jutting out of the ground. Each had a dull flame emitting a bit of smoke like it was running on some gas or oil. The lights were not bright enough to light up the garden, but they were enough to mark the way and make it beautiful. As Ajay had expected, it was a private party. The people looked like foreigners, probably British. From their dresses, it looked like a theme party. Most of them were dressed in black, long coats, and high collars… a bit uncommon even for the British nowadays. Lots of food and drinks were laid upon tables covered with white cloth. They must have selected this time for total privacy, Ajay thought. He stayed hidden behind the row of trees and looked at the view. Since the lights were only about two or two and half feet from the ground, the faces of people were not clearly visible. The men and women were sitting on the chairs, while some kids were frolicking around. After a round of drinks, someone called for music. A soft and melodic music started emanating from somewhere. There seemed to be some wireless speakers placed under the tables or bushes. The men and women got up and started dancing. It was a slow, romantic type of couple dance. It was a beautiful sight to watch. There was no loud music or DJ. The people could conversate without any need to

raise their voices.

While the adults danced, the children were running around, and playing little games with each other. Ajay found himself swaying with the music. After enjoying the scene for a few moments, he decided to return to the room. When he turned, a girl came running into the trees and stood behind the tree which was right in front of Ajay. Their eyes met for a moment. Ajay feared being caught peeking into a private party. But she looked at him and smiled, her eyes were full of playfulness and mischief. Her face was flawless, pale, with rosy cheeks. There was a hint of dimple in her smile. Ajay returned the smile with a polite formal smile. She seemed to be 15 or 16 years old. She was tall, reaching a little above Ajay's shoulders. Her dress was green with a bright white shirt with a high neck, and long loose sleeves. It was tiny at the waist, with a voluminous silk skirt matching the Victorian theme of the party.

She had dark hair. Ajay could not say what colour her hair was, but they were not blond. The small hat she was wearing had a rose on it. She looked at Ajay, and signalled him to stay quiet. The dimpled smile never left her face. She seemed to be hiding from someone.

Ajay turned to the party, the dark figures of the elders had stopped dancing. They were standing in a circle now. They seemed to be discussing something of importance, while the children kept running around.

Ajay looked at the girl again, he sensed a strong Deja-vu feeling. But he could not recall when he had seen her. He thought that he might have seen someone like her in a British movie.

A boy, probably of the same age as the girl, was wandering around the party looking for her. He was wearing a black frock coat, with a waist coat underneath and straight trousers. The girl giggled when the boy came closer, but could not find her. Ajay looked at the girl and he also chuckled, as if he was part of the game or a joke this girl was playing at this boy.

'Kim… where are you?' The boy spoke, his accent clearly British. He seemed to be frustrated about not being able to find the girl. The girl giggled.

'Kim…' he shouted once again.

'It is over, I am going back now,' He stomped his foot and started walking away.

She giggled again, looking at Ajay.

‘Silly boy,’ the girl said.

Not knowing what to say, Ajay nodded. He was mesmerised by the girl’s beauty. He felt compelled to talk to her.

‘So, you are Kim?’

‘Oh, good evening, sir, yes, I am Miss Kim. Pleasure to meet you’ she said, holding her skirt with both hands, doing a curtsy.

Ajay was taken aback with her mannerism. She seemed to be in character for the theme party.

‘I just happened to walk around, and noticed this party. The music sounded lovely. Sorry if I had interrupted.’

‘Oh, it is not a bother at all. You are welcome to join us.’

Just then, their conversation was interrupted by a shriek. One of the women, who was standing in the circle, fell on the ground.

‘Oh my god, what’s happening there?’ The words escaped Ajay’s mouth.

Then after another shriek, a man dropped on the floor. But strangely the others standing beside them did not help them to get up or check on them. Instead, there were some chuckles and laughs heard. Kim too, instead of getting shocked, was smiling. Her smile making the dimples on her cheek more prominent.

‘What is happening there?’ Ajay spoke again.

‘That is a game, sir, they are alright. They play it every night,’ she said.

‘Game?’

‘Oh yes, they are playing Wink Murder, a funny game,’

‘Oh,’ Ajay had no idea about the game. He looked at the group again. One man seemed to be standing in the centre of the circle. He yelled something like ‘Found you…’ and then everyone laughed. The fallen woman and man also got up.

‘What do you do sir? If I may know?’ the girl said.

‘Hey, no need to call me 'Sir'. You can call me Ajay. And I am an Engineer, working with an MNC,’

Kim kept looking at Ajay, she seemed intrigued by him. Ajay thought he needed to explain more.

‘I am here with friends, we are taking a break from work,’ And life too, Ajay thought. A glimmer of sadness appeared in his eyes. Ajay concealed his thoughts with a tight-lipped smile.

The girl looked at him directly. She came closer and held his hand. As she touched Ajay, she shook like Ajay’s hands were made of ice. Suddenly, the playfulness in her eyes vanished. She kept on looking at Ajay. There was no shyness in her eyes, it was like she was searching for something in Ajay’s eyes.

‘Shiv…’ She whispered.

‘What?’

‘Nothing, do you mind we take a walk around here?’ the girl said.

‘Will they not miss you?’ Ajay said pointing towards the lawn.

‘No, once they start playing games, they will be lost in them for hours, may be whole night,’

Behind the row of trees, obscured from the Party’s view, they walked. Ajay was rubbing his hands together to beat the chill, while the girl was comfortable.

‘Are you cold?’ She asked.

‘It is a bit chilly, but I like it. It is anytime better than the Delhi heat. What about you?’ Ajay said.

‘I am used to this cold.’ She replied, her face was impassive.

They kept on walking in silence for some time.

‘You seem sad.’ The girl blurted.

‘What?’

‘You seem to be deeply disturbed by something,’

Ajay was shaken to the core. How could this girl… about half his own age… a foreigner, know about his life.

‘No, I mean yes, why do you say so?’

‘It is there, in your eyes, you are here, roaming around alone at night, not able to sleep, while your friends are fast asleep in their rooms. It does not take much intelligence to know that you are upset about something,’

‘Actually, I just came out of a marriage. But believe me, today is the happiest day in my life,’

‘It is happiest for me too’ She whispered.

‘What?’

‘Nothing, tell me how is it your happiest day?’ Kim asked.

‘Well, I met my friends after so long, we had a party. I laughed after so many days today,’ Suddenly Ajay felt like he was talking to himself. Kim nodded, encouraging Ajay to continue.

He continued, ‘And now, I happened to meet you. That too, is a stroke of happiness for me’

‘And yet, you are anxious,’

Ajay smiled. She was right. Despite the happy moments, Ajay could not shake the feeling of impending doom. He was like a fragile glass placed precariously, which can smash into pieces with a little carelessness and there was no way to save it.

Ajay took a deep breath and spoke, ‘I have seen so much misfortune in my life that I get a bit scared whenever something good happens to me. It’s like I am scared to be happy. Somewhere I cannot forget that it will not last. I still have to return to my lonely house in Delhi.’ There were tears in Ajay’s eyes as he shared his vulnerability. The girl stopped walking and turned to face Ajay. Her eyes were fixed on Ajay’s. An understanding smile on her face.

Ajay continued. ‘I want this happiness to never end. I wish this night could continue forever, so much of the wishful thinking.’ He chuckled, surprised that the cover of dark had made his inhibitions vanish, and he was sharing his innermost emotions with a complete stranger, whom he just met

in the middle of the night at a party, where he was not invited.

Kim came ahead and held Ajay's hand. 'You know sir, sorrow has a power of its own. It destroys the fake things and brings you closer to the reality, to what you really desire. You *can* stay happy like this forever, if you decide on that. Sometimes the beginning of true happiness starts from the depths of Sorrow.'

Ajay nodded, trying to absorb her words. He had not expected such conversation from a young girl. He thought for a few moments, and felt that she was right. The sorrow has made him find his truer self.

After a moment, he spoke again, 'That does make some sense. But that does not mean one should be on a look out for sorrow,'

'True sir, but being truly sorrowful is rare, even that needs god's blessings'

'You have a way of talking, but I think you are too young to understand this' Ajay chuckled.

She looked at Ajay for a moment, looking at the sad smile on Ajay's face.

'I see the things as they are,' she said.

Ajay remained silent, trying to understand her. He looked at her. She was walking calmly, her eyes at the dark trunks of the trees around them, and a hint of smile on her face.

'Let us have a walk outside,' she said.

'Walk out? they said it is not allowed at night.'

'Walk with me, no one will see us. Kasauli's true beauty can be seen at night,'

Ajay agreed. The girl held his hand and they started walking. It was odd, a strange girl was holding his hand, yet Ajay felt like it was the most natural thing, like he was used to walking like that with her. It was one of the rare occurrences, when strangers meet like true friends seeing each other after a long time. It was dreamlike. Everything was dreamlike for Ajay that evening.

They were outside the hotel gate. Ajay did not remember when they

walked out of the hotel. He looked back, the hotel's gate was dark and closed. Kim was still holding his hand. Maybe he had lost the sense of time. The darkness of night and their conversions seemed to have breached the boundaries of time somewhere. He kept looking back, half expecting someone to come and grab his neck, maybe a hotel guard, or Sodhi, but no one came.

Despite the journey of the day, then a long session of fun conversations with friends, Ajay was not tired. On the contrary he was feeling full of energy… not a bit sleepy. The more he walked, the lighter he felt, like someone had punched a hole in a sandbag he was carrying on his back. They walked on the twisted slopes with many ups and down as if they had no weight. Ajay was surprised that he did not even lose a breath.

They passed through every street of Kasauli. Every place was closed, being outside felt like being in a large beautiful resort adorned with some beautiful lights. Time has lost its power in those moments. It was a beautiful, endless night. Ajay did not care once about returning to the hotel.

Twice, the police patrolling jeep passed in front of them. But the police did not bother them. Ajay and Kim reached the sun set point, where there was no sun of course, but a beautiful sheet of tiny lights was spread in the valley far below. The girl was still holding Ajay's hand. It had been long since someone had held his hand like this.

She looked at him.

'How do you feel now?' She said.

'Blissful. I had never seen Kasauli at night, and yet it feels I have seen this view' Ajay whispered.

'You may have been here,'

'I have been here, but today I feel like more… like at home, free of worries,'

'It is your home, Shiv'

Ajay nodded, not surprised that she called him with a different name.

'Remember, when we went to the Choo-Mantar temple, and climbed up that tree,'

She nodded.

‘You scraped knee falling from it’

She chuckled softly, her eyes were shiny with tears. She lifted the dress showing her knee. The scraping marks were still there.

‘Oh, dear Kim,’ Ajay leaned forward and kissed her on her forehead. She placed her head on Ajay’s chest.

‘Hey, what happened?’ Ajay asked when he felt her sobs.

‘Nothing, nothing happened, since the day you had left me,’

For a few moments Ajay became still, looking at the vast blanket of lights in the valley below. Kim looked up at his face. He was confused.

She leaned up, brought her lips closer to Ajay’s and kissed.

A set of images flooded Ajay’s mind. He saw himself playing with a younger Kim in a large house, which looked the same as the hotel. An elderly British man, Kim’s father, is studying big maps in one room. A very pale English lady, Kim’s mother lying on a bed in one room, servants tending to her. Trees being cut around. Workers building roads. Kim’s laugh. Walking with Kim to Choo Mantar Temple. Falling Kim. Picking her up in his hands and bringing her to her home. Getting slapped by Kim’s angry mother. His hands banging on the closed door. Sneaking in at night, walking with Kim. Kissing her.

He felt tied-up, ropes cutting into his skin, darkness around him, he was blindfolded. Someone lifted him up. Then the fall followed by pain, Ajay winced.

‘I had to meet you Shiva, I begged God to send you to me again, please do not leave me again.’

‘What is happening? What is happening to me?’ Ajay spoke.

‘You know everything now, you are Shiva, my love. I have waited for you for so long. We have finished all our emotions, and now only love remains, and we are now together for ever’

She stood up and walked ahead. She looked back and stretched her hand, asking Ajay to join her. Ajay walked ahead, and joined her. While he walked, he felt like a huge weight was lifted off him. He felt fresh like a new

born. Kim took his hand and rested her head on his shoulder. Ajay looked down, and saw his body fall into the depths below.

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Next morning, when Sodhi got up, he did not find Ajay with him. He checked Nitin and Akshit's room too, Ajay was not there either. He checked the balcony, the terrace, and the upper floor. Ajay was nowhere. Sodhi checked his room again, Ajay's bag was there. His laptop with its screen open was also there at the table besides the sofa. He dialled Ajay's number on his phone. The sound of the phone's ring came from within the room, it was lying there on the bedside table.

'Did our friend leave the hotel last night?' Sodhi asked the receptionist. Nitin and Akshit were also by his side now.

Understanding the confusion, the receptionist called the security guard. The guard confirmed that he had locked the exit door at night, and opened it in the morning. As per him no one had opened the door during the night.

'That means only one thing, Ajay is somewhere in the hotel.' Nitin said.

The manager, who had now joined the receptionist, ordered a search. They checked all the floors, the vacant rooms under renovation, the balcony, kitchen, and terrace. There was no sign of Ajay. It was noon when they reported to the Police.

But Ajay was never found.

BOY IN THE WALL

‘Of course, I remember it,’ My Nani said.

‘Then what happened?’ I asked my Nani-ma.

‘There was a man with a very large book. He read something in the book and ordered the men who took me there, to send me back.’

‘Why?’

‘They had brought up a wrong Bimla, they mistook me for her’

‘And then?’

‘Then what? They sent me back, and I was alive again’

‘And what about the other Bimla?’

‘Yes, there was an old lady in the street behind this one, she died the same day’

‘Wow’

I had heard this story many times from my Nani-ma, but I asked her to tell me again every time I met her, it gave me goosebumps. She always told it with complete sincerity, she had full belief that it was true. As per the story, she had died when she was only three years old and came back to life the same day because of a mistake of the Yamdoots (The messengers of Death God – Yama).

‘Kuch ni kehnda... Kuch ni kehnda’ (Won't say anything... Won’t say anything), my Nanaji came in and mumbled looking at nothing in particular in the room. My Nani-ma and Mother also looked at Nanaji but did not say anything.

Nanaji went out, walked around the house, and again came into the

room. After a moment, he looked at the wall and said the same words again.

I wanted to ask him about whom he was talking to. But my mother and Nani-ma gestured to me to stay silent. After he left, Nani-ma spoke. ‘He keeps mumbling such things, it is just his age. He has gone crazy. It is getting very difficult for me,’ He was around ninety years old, while my Nani-ma was seventy-five.

I chuckled. I cannot blame myself for being insensitive, I was only seven.

Within the first day of our arrival at Nani’s house, I could see why Nani-ma was saying things like this. Nanaji would keep on mumbling meaningless things. I would hear him talk while he was alone in his room to the emptiness or walls of the house.

‘Maaf kar deo mainu’ (Please forgive me).

‘Chal nath ja ethon’ (Get lost from here).

‘Chup kar ja,’ (‘Shut up’) Even when no one was talking. Sometimes even when he was alone in the room.

‘Oye, Koi na…Koi na’ (Hey, it is ok).

Nanaji’s heavily wrinkled face will sometimes smile at nothing.

My Nani-ma told me that it was his age, and I should not disturb him. She said that he was lost in his memories, and while recalling them, he speaks out.

Also, this time when he saw me, he took a long time to recognize me. It could also be because of my visit after about two years, and I had changed a lot, and much taller. But he was not a nuisance to anyone in the house. He would take a bath sitting under the hand pump in the early hours of the day, and stay in his room for most of the time. He smoked his favourite beedis all day. He was one of the rare examples which people give in favour of smoking because he had no apparent ill effect of smoking and he was ninety years old. Although it irritates me now, at that time I liked the smoky smell which came from everything in his room. Instead of a regular sized ash-tray, my Nanaji used a big white painted steel pan for cigarette ash. The regular one was just not enough.

Even though both Nanaji and Nani-ma lived there, we called it Nani's house. Maybe because my Nanaji kept to himself, and it would be Nani-ma who would engage with us for most of the time.

The house was on the corner of a very narrow street. It was much bigger than our aprtment in the city and its design was very old with an open space in the middle with rooms all around. There were seven rooms, all on the ground floor. Four of them were very old with an arched ceiling supported by beams, and three new ones with flat roofs, and special windows on top of the walls for light and ventilation. There were solid round bars on the double-paned windows that opened towards the street. There were two bathrooms and two kitchens, big enough to be guest rooms. There was also one room converted to a store-cum-temple.

In its prime, the house had seen a large family with my grandparents and their six children. But now all three daughters were married, one son had moved to Shimla for a job, and the other one had settled somewhere out of the country. I never found out more about this brother, because I have never met him. With just my grandmother and my grandfather at home, five of the seven rooms remained closed.

It was not an ideal place where some regular kid would wish to go for his vacations. I mean it was not a beach resort, or a hill station, and not even a nice village house with fields. But I was fascinated with the old stuff, and the place had a lot. First of all, the books, the old ones, with lots of interesting stories, most of them religious or mythological. There was a huge pile of mythological books in one of the rooms. This room was usually locked, but it was opened especially for my mother and me. The books had that musty old book smell. Second, there was a small comic shop in the nearby market which rented comics at prices like fifty paise per day, and third and the most important thing for me was the roof. Since all the rooms were on the ground floor only, there was a large roof to play on. And unlike my city house, I could easily hop on to other roofs of neighbours up to the end of the street. This roof was mainly empty except for a small store-like room, with a lot of old stuff. I could find more than fifteen-year-old wall calendars lying there.

Being the corner house, there were narrow roads on the front and left side and adjoining houses on the rear and right side. Those houses were built similarly. From the roof, I could jump into the roofs of the next house and

could reach the last house in the street, jumping like that. Doing this was impossible in the city.

The situation in the next house or the house on the other side of the street was the same as my Nani's house. All were large houses, with the kids either married off or working away, leaving the elder people alone. The afternoon is nap-time for the elderly. That is when everything is silent. One cannot find such silence even during the night in a big city. And this was the time I would go on my explorations. I would go to the small room on the roof and sift through all kinds of dusty old stuff. I would sometimes find a lot of lizards and their eggs too. But I was not afraid of anything at that time. I would jump from terrace to terrace, reaching the other end of the street, where I could see the distant Churan factory. In the process, I would often treat myself to the raw peanuts kept on the terrace by neighbours. I will not call it stealing, because I know they will not mind sharing some with me. I enjoyed raw peanuts for the first time there, and I still do.

An interesting thing was that there was no wall sharing with the adjacent house. It had its own separate wall parallel to the wall of my Nani's house. There was a gap of about six inches between the walls. While jumping back with my hands and pockets loaded with the peanuts, I accidentally dropped a handful of peanuts into the gap. I gazed into the gap. Since the sun was almost directly above, I could see the gap properly. There was some debris at the bottom of the void. For a moment, I imagined what if someone fell into this gap. I shuddered with the thought. Then analysed that gap was not wide enough for someone like me to fall into. But I could get stuck… or if my new slipper falls into it, it would be the end of it. From then onward, I was extra careful in crossing the gap.

Exhausted by the heat during my roof-hopping exploration, I came downstairs to the room with old books. I liked the smell of old books. The sunlight coming from three big ventilation windows lit up the room brightly. My other exploration activity started here. There were many Puranas, big books, and very big fonts, most of them in Hindi, or sometimes in Sanskrit with Hindi translations. There were also old storybooks. My Nani-ma did not like my curiosity, especially about the books. She asked me to take one book at a time, read it and then touch another. But how could I decide which one to read without reading a little from all?

I was exploring the old books while my mother was with Nani-ma in another room and Nanaji was busy smoking in his room. I heard a soft knocking sound. I looked around for the source but could not find anything. I went back to the books, and the knocking sound came again, this time a bit louder. It was coming from the wall. Because of the gap between the walls, there were sometimes sounds of stones falling or movement of mice or squirrels in the gap. But this sound was peculiar, in a rhythm, like someone was knocking the wall with a palm flat. No mouse or squirrel could do that. After a moment, the sound stopped.

Slowly, I went close to the wall, there was no sound. I placed my ear on the wall, I wanted to check if the sound was really coming from the wall. For a moment, there was no sound. I waited for a while, and when I was about to move away from the wall, I heard a wail, a weak and surely a human whimper and it was right from the same spot in the wall. I was frozen with fear. I did not remember the Hanuman Chalisa, but I had heard that even his name was enough to scare off evil spirits. I chanted, ‘Jai Bajrang Bali’ ‘Jai Bajrang Bali’. Speaking it unfroze me, and the next moment I ran out of the room, still chanting ‘Jai Bajrang Bali’

My mother and Nani-ma were in the other room. I told them about the sound I had heard. I was shaking.

‘Vihan, why are you scared, you heard a kid cry, so what?’ my mother said.

‘But… But Mumma, there are two walls, how can I hear through them, who can be behind them?’

‘There must be some kids with neighbours. It is summer vacation time, it must be Kanta Aunty’s daughter,’ my mother said.

‘But it was loud, I heard it clearly,’

‘Vihan, you know it is silent here. Unlike Chandigarh, there is no sound of traffic or cars. With everything silent, you must have heard it clearly, it is ok.’

That may be correct. I thought. I felt like I had made a fool of myself, but thereafter I avoided going to that room alone.

At night, again the house is a delight to ears. And once my mother

and my Nani-ma slept after their long conversations, which happened every day while we slept. Nani-ma especially brought her charpoy to the room with us, so that she and my mother could talk while lying on their beds, even after the lights were off. A mother-daughter bond is like that, you give them as much time as they want, something will always be left for discussion, and the talks will never be over. I usually slept before their conversations would end.

That night even after my mother and Nani-ma slept, I was not able to sleep. My mind kept on catching all the sounds. The main sound was the slow whirring of the creaky old fan. Thereafter, the street dogs assembled outside for a session of barking which lasted for a few minutes. The room was right on the street, everything happening on the street was clearly audible. It must have been a little after midnight when I heard clank sounds of a bamboo stick being hit hard on the brick street outside, followed by a man yelling '*Jaagde rahoo*' (Stay awake). My mother had told me it was the *Chowkidaar*, the night guard, doing his duty. I asked my mother if we have one in Chandigarh too. She told me we had one and he used a whistle. Although I had never heard him there. Maybe because of the other sounds and more distance between the street and our room.

I shut my eyes tightly, attempting to sleep, yet it eluded me. Suddenly, the sound of the fan stopped. I opened my eyes, it was totally still, not even slowing and stopping. The next thing I noticed was a complete absence of any sounds. The street, the dogs, or even cricket, all were silent. That is when I saw him… or it.

It came from the wall. I could clearly make an outline of a kid. It was shaking erratically while it moved further from the wall. I tried to yell, but I could produce no sound. I tried to get up, but I could not move my body. It was like my head was awake and the rest of the body was paralysed. The figure was coming closer. As the shadow moved across the beam of street light falling in the house, I could see its face. It was the bruised face of a boy. Its eyes fixed on me. It came closer to me. I was still frozen… unable to move even a finger. The thing's face was a mixture of anger and sadness. I shut my eyes tightly, and it started wailing loudly. It was the same sound that I had heard from the wall earlier during the day, but much louder. I was not a chicken-hearted kid, but that sound almost made me wet my bed. I tried to cry out to wake up my mother and Nani-ma, but they were fast asleep, and I was not able to make any sound.

It came closer and stood next to my bed. I could see it very clearly now. The face was red with bruises and deep crimson with blood oozing out of them. The eyes which were fixed on me, were bigger than usual, like they had partially come out of their sockets. The nose was broken and hanging loose from a fragment of bone. Part of the upper lip was missing, showing his front teeth and gums. His face seemed to be flattened by a grinding stone. I was shaking now, but still not able to move or say anything. The kid had stopped wailing now and was intently looking at me.

And then, it bent down and brought his face closer to my arm, and opened his mouth. I was crying and shaking badly now, but could not do anything. I shut my eyes, and then I felt a searing pain in my arm. It felt like a chunk of flesh from my arm had been chewed out. I was sure that I was going to die now.

Then I heard the door creaking open. I thought the boy was leaving the room. I opened my eyes slowly, the boy was still there, but he was looking at the door, where my Nanaji was standing.

'*Oye, Nath Ja,*' (Oye, run away)

The kid looked at my Nanaji, still standing there.

'*Janda hai ken nahi*' (Will you go or not?)

The kid moved back, as if he was floating in the air, and disappeared near the wall.

'*Fer na tang Karin munde nu,*' (Do not bother the kid again). My Nanaji said, to the wall.

And then Nanaji went out of the room. And suddenly the night became noisy again, the creaky fan started whirring, cricket started chirping. I tried to move my body, and I could. It was not stiff any more. A wave of relaxation came and I fell asleep the next moment.

The next morning, I woke up later than usual. My Mother and Nani-ma were sitting on a charpoy in the open area. I looked towards the wall and then at my arm. To my relief, my arm was not as badly bitten, as I had felt, but there were surely some faint bite-marks. I jumped out of the bed and went out to my mother. She was having tea and talking about something with my Nani-ma when I interrupted them abruptly and told her all I had seen last

night. My mother thought that it was another of my pranks, or I had a nightmare. But when my Nani-ma saw the marks on my hand, she suddenly became serious. Then, she told us about the boy.

‘One afternoon when everyone was asleep, the boy was jumping from the terraces alone and nobody saw the boy when he fell. It was after two days when he was found dead, pressed between the walls.’

‘The poor kid could not even move his hands, legs or even his face. When they found, his body was partially rotten and being eaten by the worms. I always prayed that he should have died before his body was slowly eaten away by the worms’ She said.

SOME OF THE POPULAR MYSTERIES OF MOUNTAINS

The Devatas

Himachal Pradesh, also known as Dev Bhoomi, is the land of Devatas, or divine beings. Every village on this land has a Devata or a Devi, a local deity who is not only worshipped, but also treated as a real living entity. Like an elder member of the family who is respected and sought advice from. They are invited to homes as a chief guest on special occasions such as the purchase of a new home or the marriage of a child.

And, they dance. Yes, these Devatas, which are made of gold and silver faces on a wooden palanquin, mostly shrouded in red cloth with golden parasols overhead, dance too. Besides dancing, they do things like bathing in a river, talking to other Devatas, as well as summoning someone if they wish to.

Whoever does not know them would think that they are fairy tale characters. But they exist today, in this era of internet and AI, and not just in one or two places but all over the Himalayan region in India, including Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, and they are believed in and revered by all residents.

Bijli Mahadev's Temple (Thunder Mahadev's Temple)

Located in the Kullu valley of Himachal Pradesh, this is a temple dedicated to lord Shiva, also known as Mahadev. It takes a small trek of three kilometres to reach this beautiful temple. It is also called Bijli Mahadev or thunder Mahadev temple because it gets struck by lightning every twelve years. Not only that, the Shivaling in the temple is shattered into pieces by the lightning. The priest collects the pieces of the Shivaling and joins them back using just

butter. After a few months, it becomes a solid Shivaling again.

Kamrunag Lake

This lake is an enigma, located amid deep deodar trees in Rohanda, around 50 kilometres from Mandi District in Himachal Pradesh. The way to reach this lake is to cover five kilometres uphill by foot. People have been putting gold and silver coins in the lake since ancient times in reverence to God or to have their desires realised by God *Kamrunag*, making it a vast treasure. To this day, people drop coins and currency notes into the lake.

With people putting gold and silver into the lake, an enormous treasure is accumulated at the base of the lake. Still, there is no security arrangement. Everyone knows about the treasure at the bottom of the lake, accessible to anyone who can dive. The currency notes are visible through the clear water of lake. And yet, no one has ever been able to recover the treasure or the money. Any attempt to extract the wealth from the lake is always foiled by a natural force.

Siddhasharam, the secret Land

A mysterious hermitage is said to be located near Mount Kailash, also known as Gyangunj (the land of knowledge). It has been mentioned in many ancient texts, including the oldest, Rigveda. As per the legends it is there but can be seen by the accomplished Yogis who achieve a high level of spiritual practice.

An Interesting fact

Mall Road: - Mall Roads are the popular streets in the tourist cities like Shimla, Manali, Mussoorie, Nainital etc, where tourists love to stroll through. Most people perceive the meaning of Mall Road, as *Maal* (Commodity) Road, as they are also famous for shopping. However, the ‘Mall’ is an abbreviation for Married Accommodation and Living Line Road. It was termed so by the British Military. One side of the road was meant for the married British Officers and other for the offices, messes etc.

GLOSSARY

Devata. Devata is a divine deity or God. A *Gram-Devata* means deity of a particular Village. (Gram is a Hindi word for Village)

Lohri. Lohri is a popular winter festival celebrated mainly in Northern India. It is celebrated by lighting bonfires.

Churel. Churel is a mythical creature resembling a woman, mostly with ugly features and shape-shifting powers.

Bhoot. Ghost of a deceased person.

Ghungroos. Ghungroos are accessories usually worn by dancers around their ankles. They are strewn with small bells which make a sound as the dancer moves or stomps.

Pahari. Pahari is a word used to cover anything which pertains to mountains. It can be the people, dialects, clothing, or food.

Prasadam. Prasadam is the small sweet or eatable usually given after the prayers to the people who visit temples.

Himachali. Himachali is a word covering anything which pertains to Himachal Pradesh. It can be the people, dialects, clothing, or food.

Lok. Lok or Loka are the Sanskrit words for the regions in which the universe is divided as per Hinduism.

Dosa. A popular South Indian dish made from fermented rice.

Idli. A popular South Indian dish, a kind of savoury rice cake.

Darshan. Hindi word for an auspicious sight of holy person, image or deity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Saurabh Sehgal, on the surface, may appear to be a typical MBA professional from the corporate sector, hailing from Chandigarh, India. However, beneath this exterior lies a passionate observer, one who finds joy in keenly studying people and phenomena from diverse perspectives.

An avid reader, who likes to put his thoughts on paper. Apart from his love for the written word, Saurabh revels in engaging in profound conversations over coffee, finding inspiration in the exchange of ideas.

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